ADA 11 Rebel Dream

Eleven
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Borleias Occupation, Day 1
Watching from the bridge of the Star Destroyer *Mon Mothma,* General Wedge Antilles followed the maneuvers of two coralskippers; scouts from the Yuuzhan Vong occupation force at Borleias. The *Mon Mothma* was a newer generation Star Destroyer, complete with gravity-well generators to disrupt the micro-jumps the Yuuzhan Vong were so fond of employing.
Having been alerted to the presence of the Yuuzhan Vong fighterse by the Mon Calamari sensor operator, the lean general, commander of the Borleias invasion fleet, motioned with a hand. "Gunnery, stay on them, vape them if they come against us. Fighter control, continue launching starfighter squadrons."
Two positive acknowledgments later, and the fighters began to peel away from their carriers, appearing as colored blips on the data screens. The New Republic starfighters, a literal sheet of A-9's, X-wings, B-wings, E-Wings, all streamed out and towards Borleias. The pilots of the fighters were all veterans of one conflict or another. All had lost someone, and in some cases, their entire squadron, to the Yuuzhan Vong.
Wedge stood at the captain's station at the rear of the bridge, watching the looming presence of Borleias before them. With his own family and the devastation of Coruscant at the forefront of his thoughts, he tightened his hands into fists at the small of his back. *I hope the Vong here have come to love this world,* he told himself. *Because I'm going to take it from them. They're going to learn what it's like to lose the things they love.*
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Zindra Daine, though more commonly referred to as 'the daughter of Wraith Squadron's mechanic,' hit her thrusters and her X-wing roared out of the main docking bay, losing altitude relative to the *Mon Mothma*. Behind her, the eight present members of Twin Suns Squadron, the temporary X-wing squad that was under her very temporary command, formed up on her. "Twin Suns away," she said, unable to stop her voice from shaking slightly.
The squadron was originally meant to be under the command of a Jedi Master. Luke Skywalker to be exact. In his absence, Corran Horn, again another Jedi Master, was supposed to take over. And in *his* absence, the squadron was Mara Jade-Skywalker's. Unfortunately, they were

fresh out of Jedi Masters at the moment; something to do with the conflict that had occurred at Hapes. As Twin Sun's Four, the honor of commanding the squadron had fallen on her shoulders.
Zindra had no idea why some people just assumed that, because her father worked on the X-wings of the most prestigious intelligence unit in the New Republic, she would also be capable of great things. Often, the people she met couldn't seem to separate her from her father—despite the fact that she was a pilot and he had a permanent layer of grease embedded in his elbows. With the Jedi Masters unavailable, General Wedge Antilles had chosen her to lead the squadron in their place.
For the life of her, she couldn't figure out why.
She'd only just graduated to a combat-ready squadron when the war had broken out. Her first conflict had seen most of her squadron go down in flames, and herself spaced with a piece of her snub-fighter lodged in her side. After that, the unfortunate phrase of 'learning through experience,' became a whole lot more meaningful to her. She was just a novice pilot who was lucky enough to have survived for so long. It didn't mean the powers-to-be had to promote her!
"Twins Suns copy." The voice of the controller aboard the *Mon Mothma* shook her out of her self-pitying. *Great way to get myself vaped. "Be advised, two coralskippers are maneuvering into your flight path."*
Zindra glanced at her sensor board. two red blips were indeed turning from below to head toward them. "Squadron, follow me out, let's give these two the gauntlet treatment."
She heard a chorus of acknowledgments and felt some sense of relief to know that they were willing to follow her. There was tension in some of the voices, but not alarm. All of the pilots had similar stories to her own. They were lone survivors, remnants of a wing-pair or shield trio; all had to likewise 'learn from their experiences.' They were disciplined, competent, but most importantly for Zindra, they wanted revenge.
Zindra knew how they felt. In addition to the squadron mates she had lost, she was also still unaware of the status of her own father. He had been on Coruscant, in the Wraith Squadron's headquarters, when the planet had been hit. In fact, she had been talking with him seconds before the attack. She had even stared in horror when an explosion occurred behind her father, Cubber, and the transmission went dead. She remembered staring at the blank screen, her mind in a similar state, for several long minutes before her bunkmate had shaken her from her shock.
As young and inexperienced as she was in the cockpit, Zindra's eagerness for payback was offset by her desire to keep the rest of her

squadron alive. General Antilles, a living legend, had entrusted her with their lives, and she would not let them down. She let out several deep breaths as her X-wing moved into position. She had heard pilots from other squadrons refer to her as a 'smooth-faced innocent,' someone who had yet to be irreparably scarred by combat. She was going to prove them wrong. The death of her entire squadron *had* left a deep scar on her, and she was not keen to receive another. She double-checked the positions of the rest of her squadron and settled into her chair.

"S-foils to attack position," Zindra said, flipping a switch that allowed her fighter to assume its iconic X-shaped attack profile. "Remember we have to take these guys together. First flight, we have the leader, the rest of you on the wing-mate. Fire at will."

She linked her lasers to quad fire, for maximum damage, and opened up on the lead coralskipper. Four red flashes of destructive laser energy pierced through the vacuum of space towards the coralskipper —only they never touched the alien fighter.

Just before her burst blew through the yorik-coral, a blackness appeared before it, distorting the space around it like a gigantic magnifying lens, and drew the laserfire into it. Cursing under her breath, Zindra depressed the trigger again and again, pouring a relentless stream of lasers into the back of the swerving coralskipper. The others in her flight joined in the destructive rain. Despite the fact that none of them had Jedi reflexes, they had long ago learned that if you poured enough laser fire in one location, the coralskipper's defenses would be overwhelmed. Gradually, their lasers began to break through; searing the snub-fighter's hull, blowing off bits of coral, but still the hardy craft flew.

Zindra was forced to pull up when it launched one of its plasma projectiles at her. She looped around, expecting a pursuit, but was surprised to see that both coralskippers were continuing their path towards the *Mon Mothma*. A quick check of her sensor readout showed that her squadron was still intact, that the Yuuzhan Vong were not bombarding them with deadly magma and plasma projectiles.

"They're not engaging." Twin Suns Eleven, a Commenorian woman named Tilath Keer, said what they were all thinking. *"Turning to pursue."*

Zindra saw the blips that meant that the rest of her squad had veered off to follow. She turned her own X-wing to follow suit, but her desire to ensure her people's survival overriding her own eagerness to vape the Vong. As she brought her X-wing into position, she worried her lower lip, a habit she had developed whenever she had to make a big

decision. "Twin Suns…Hold position, I think the Vong have a skifter up their sleeves. I repeat, don't pursue."
"Lead?"
"Twin Suns Seven, do you remember the tactic those Vong used at Obroa-Skai?"
"They used our own landing bays against us." There was a pause. *"Think they're trying the same thing?"*
"Since our own fighters were pursuing theirs, our cruisers couldn't open fire." Zindra nodded, then rolled her eyes at herself when she remembered that they couldn't see her. She switched channels. "*Mon Mothma*, these skips are yours. Twins Suns is moving to support *Record Time.*"
The Twin Suns pulled away, and within the blink of an eye, the coralskippers were ripped apart by tree-trunk sized laser beams. Like bubbles, the Yuuzhan Vong fighters erupted, their dovin basals unable to handle the powerful lasers. The first fighter was completely reduced to atoms. The second, though more skilled at soaking up damage with its voids, was cleaved in two, its aft section a smoking mess. It bounced off the *Mon Mothma* and spun away.
Zindra shook her head at the waste of life. Not that she felt sorry for the Vong. It just seemed so ridiculous to charge a Star Destroyer with only two fighters. She formed up her fighters around the *Record Time*, the bulbous transport donated by Lando and Tendra Calrissian. Though it looked ridiculously vulnerable, she had heard that Lando himself had vouched for its space-worthiness. In peace-time it might have carried industrial goods, but now it was full of soldiers.
Zindra's comm unit hissed with a moment of static, then a voice she recognized as Tendra Calrissian, crackled over: "*Record Time to Twin Suns Leader, all set."*
"Twin Suns to *Record Time,* go ahead. We'll keep pace." Even as she spoke, she glanced around the battlefield, almost in awe at the sight of the landing force. Frigates, destroyers, transports, and shuttles all descended towards Borleias like an impermeable net. As each of the ships accelerated to attack speed, Zindra returned her attention back to the planet before her.
Already, she could see coralskippers rising off the ground, a couple squadrons worth. Some people had told her that there was a natural beauty to those living ships. When they did, she started to doubt their sanity. To her, the coralskippers were always ugly lumps of plasma shooting coral that were responsible for the death of most of her friends.

As the enemy fighters rose en masse, she mentally cursed. Now came the hard part of the battle. "Twin Suns Lead here, things are about to get dicey. Stick with your wing-mate and watch each other's backs. I don't want any of you dying on me before I hand the squadron back over to the Jedi."

"Don't die, got it." Chuckled Twins Suns Nine.

"When the skips get in range, break and engage, but cover the transport. This is it."

The X-wings of Twin Suns met the screaming challenge of the coralskippers, plasma bursts exploding all around them in a dangerous shower of molten flak. In return, laser burst after laser burst forced the enemy fighters to throw up a continuous wall of voids. All around, similar scenes were playing out. The escorting fighters clashing in the upper most parts of Borleias' atmosphere with the drastically outnumbered Vong.

But just because the Vong were outnumbered didn't mean they weren't dangerous. In fact, to them, the numerical difference was simply a way to earn more glory. Their hearty craft, which had caused much panic and dismay during the opening conflicts of the war, could deal more and take more damage than the New Republic fighters could. Voids could endure entire armaments of torpedoes, while its plasma projectiles ate away at a target even after impact.

The Twin Suns X-wing squadron, at the forefront of the invasion force, slammed head on into a squadron of coralskippers unafraid of death. From the first pass alone, Zindra could see that her squadron was down a fighter. Rage coursed through her. "Twin Suns Five and Six, on me. We're vaping the next skip that makes a run on the transport. Everyone else, engage those skips."

The X-wings of Twin Suns squadron swooped in a broad arc around the *Record Time,* engaging the oncoming coralskippers at point blank range. Lasers flared, plasma ignited, and debris flew everywhere in Borleias' upper atmosphere.

Zindra slipped her own X-wing behind a coralskipper that had been making a strafing run on the armored transport, and let loose a volley of red death. The other X-wings of her shield trio joined in, overwhelming the coralskipper's void defenses and blowing apart its dovin basal. The doomed alien fighter flipped end over end as it plummeted towards the planet, becoming little more than a glowing ball of fire.

Her X-wing shook as a plasma missile detonated off her port. A quick glance to her side revealed that her upper S-foil was in the process of

being eaten away by the molten liquid. "Lead here, I've taken some plasma damage. Anyone in position to take out that skip?"
"If you can bring him across my path at point oh-five, I might be able to get a snap shot off."
"Will do Six, thanks." Zindra entered a spinning dive towards the planet, alarms in her cockpit going off as her shields attempted to resist the heat of a high-speed re-entry. She saw Twin Suns Six, himself being pursued by another coralskipper, lining up for an attack. With a blaze of speed, she darted directly in front of him.
The coralskipper pursuing her never saw the missile coming. Fired with only a couple meters to spare, the warhead slammed into the Yuuzhan Vong fighter's cockpit and ripped the fighter apart.
Free of her pursuit, Zindra looped around and fired a relentless barrage into the coralskipper tailing Twin Suns Six. The coralskipper broke off and attempted to lose her in a breakneck climb. The G-forces being pulled would have flattened anyone not protected by inertial dampeners, mechanical or of the dovin basal variety. As it was, Zindra's damaged S-foil completely tore free from the friction involved. But just when it looked as if the coralskipper would win the climb and fall back on her tail, Twin Suns Six once again came through, firing off another missile after peppering the coralskipper's voids with laser fire.
"Hey, he was mine!" Zindra pouted.
"He shot at me first," Twin Suns Six said good-naturedly. *"Anyway, it looks like we're clear for now, Lead."*
Zindra scanned her immediate area and nodded. In a way, she was relieved that Twin Suns Six, a human veteran pilot, was willing to take orders from her. She knew that the man had been present at the battle of Endor and was grateful for his support. "Okay Six, Five, let's join the others. We have a transport to follow in."
"Might be difficult to do so lead," Five replied. *"I'm reading a flight of skips breaking away from Shockwave Squadron. They're headed towards us."*
Zindra grimaced. Her own X-wing wasn't in any condition for a prolonged dogfight. She also saw that two more of her squadron had fallen off her sensors and could only pray that they had ejected. The only bright side of the conflict so far was that they had helped the *Record Time* advance through the atmosphere, and it was now nearing it landing site.
Zindra reluctantly flipped the comm lines open again. Her squadron had a job to do, no matter how beat up they were. "*Record Time,* this is Twin Suns Lead. You can either hang here with us or move forward without us. We've got your back."

"Much obliged, Twin Suns Lead. We'll see you at the landing site."
"Copy."
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"Sure, it was tax deductible. 'They'd just gather dust if you didn't donate them.' 'Oh, and if you're donating them, you might as well lead them into battle.' When I get my hands on that… "
"Sir, you are communicating with yourself. Are you malfunctioning?"
Lando gave the soldier an annoyed glare. "No."
"A secondary cause, then. You are releasing stress?"
"Yes."
"But you are veteran soldier, you have seen many battles."
"No, no, no. *You* are the soldier. *I* am a businessman. Businessmen have no place on a battle field."
"We are still in the transport, sir."
"I know that."
"I do not understand, sir."
Lando silently counted backwards from ten. "Of course you don't. But, here is something for you to compute for future reference. I don't like sweating, I never did. Sweating is not cool."
"Sir, the process of perspiration is designed to cool down organic units, such as yourself."
"Sweating also indicates hard work," Lando glared at the soldier, not that it did any good. The soldier simply stared right back. "Something that I am not fond of. Hard work is not cool, remember that."
"Yes, sir."
"Sweetie, can you not give your business advice to the droids? The last thing we want is competition."
Lando flinched at his wife's voice and glanced back to his subordinate. The YVH 1 series combat droid, a droid constructed with the sole purpose of fighting Yuuzhan Vong, sat still, emotionlessly staring at him. In fact, an entire row of droids sat before him, their expressions betraying nothing as the transport shook from a nearby missile detonation. "I have to talk about something! You try sitting back here with only Mr. Nerves-of-Durasteel for company."
"I do not have…"
"Nerves, I know! Command gamma-three-omicron, Calrissian override."
"Order confirmed, entering into sleep cycle."
"*Do you want me to send Anja back there to keep you company?"*
"I got it under control." Lando settled back into his seat and double-checked his safety harness. More to avoid the unblinking stares of the

rest of the droid army in front of him, he glanced around the rest of the cargo bay.
The soldiers from the *Dire Straits* were doing their best to keep up morale; telling jokes, encouragements, insults, and exchanging last minute pieces of advice. He wondered who the genius was who had named the transport vessel the '*Dire Straits*' in the first place. The last thing he wanted was to find himself in dire straits in record time.
Naturally, just as soon as that thought passed through his brain, the entire transport hit a rough patch of turbulence as enemy fire finally began battering on the *Record Time's* shields. He saw nausea and fear enter the faces of the men and women from the *Dire Straits*. Trying to reassure himself that his wife wasn't going to fly them apart, he looked away and back to his own soldiers.
They were still staring at him, waiting.
"Ready soldiers?" Lando called out, feeling the ship shake as they broke through Borleias' atmosphere.
In eerie synchronization, the soldiers in front of him replied as one. "Yes, sir!"
The ship touched down and the cargo bay door sprang open. All around the rest of the soldiers poured out with a yell. Lando's soldiers, however, stayed in their position.
Glancing at the carnage taking place in the jungle, Lando took a deep breath and pulled at his collar. Hoisting his blaster-pistol, Lando motioned outwards. "Move out!"
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By the time Wedge Antilles' shuttle descended to the planet's surface, the fighting was largely over. As the landing craft made a pass over what had once been a New Republic base, Wedge took in the vast expanse of destruction and death below.
Barely anything of the original base had survived the Yuuzhan Vong occupation. The parts that hadn't been completely reduced to rubble now had structures of pastel red and pearl rising out from their remains. The central building was circular in shape, with arm-like tendrils spiraling outwards like the arms of a galaxy. Its organic appearance was because it was a living creature, born and bred by the Yuuzhan Vong to be used as one of their bases.
Surrounding this central building were smaller, shell-like constructs. From past experiences with the Yuuzhan Vong, Wedge knew that these housed the population of the base. The buildings' peaceful appearance, however, hid the fact that its occupants and their allies were currently on a murderous rampage throughout the galaxy. Killing and torturing billions for the sake of their own pleasure.

Lying beside the main base was the gargantuan corpse of one of its defenders; a massive beast that had had plasma cannons mounted on its back. It was now collapsed in a pool of its own, dark blood. A victim of several kilos worth of explosives and the unorthodox tactics of Lando and a team of engineers.

Now, New Republic soldiers were swarming everywhere. The bodies of the base's defenders littered the jungle floor, intermingled with the bodies of the men and women who had died trying to take the base. The warriors had all fought to the last man, as did the shapers, using every last trick in their books before falling.

The surviving Yuuzhan Vong, who were now being herded by the New Republic forces into a makeshift pen, were devoid of the usual scarring and blemishes seen on the pilots and warriors. Shamed Ones, Wedge concluded, as both these smooth-skinned Vong and the base's unfortunate slave population, were rounded up.

He made one more pass over the battlefield, before thumbing his comlink. "Rogue One, this is Antilles. Give me an escort, we're going to visit the biotics facility."

As two X-wings fell into position next to his shuttle, Wedge eased the throttle forward and surveyed the long, wedge-shaped, multistory building that had once been the headquarters to General Derricote's biological weapon's program. Unlike the rest of the original base, which had been used for target practice, and the standing Yuuzhan Vong base, which was no doubt filled with all sorts of nasty traps, this hardened building appeared relatively intact. The jungle had grown around it, to be sure, but the material Derricote had used when constructing his secret weapon's facility had endured both the test of time and the Yuuzhan Vong occupation.

Beaming images of the building to the *Mon Mothma,* Wedge issued a litany of orders. From clearing out the base, to installing power generators and establishing a landing zone. From razing the surrounding forest to set up a fire-zone, to relocating prisoners and ordering the destruction of the Yuuzhan Vong base, Wedge continued to go through a mental checklist of what was needed. Once it was done, he let out a relieved sigh. If the Yuuzhan Vong didn't kill him, he was sure that all the little administrative details would. It was times like this when he wished he were retired again. Retired, or at least fighting. Ordering the placement of desks and personnel was a far cry from blowing up enemy buildings and fighters.

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The Trickster, En Route to Borleias

Anakin Solo quirked an eyebrow as he watched his blond girlfriend spar in the cargo area of the *Trickster*. It took great effort to hold back the laughter that was threatening to escape, but if the glare from harsh green eyes was anything to go by, Tahiri had felt his amusement anyways. It wasn't that she was doing a poor job, or even beating the stuffing out of her opponent, it was more like she was having a great difficulty trying to get her opponent to actually strike at her.

Her opponent in question was the petite Yuuzhan Vong Shamed One, Shaeri, a self-proclaimed acolyte of the sect of Yun-Shuno. Awkwardly holding a training coufee in one small hand, the Shamed One had an expression of pure horror when Tahiri motioned that she should stab at her. Vigorously shaking her head in protest, Shaeri threw the weapon down and prostrated herself before Tahiri, babbling in Yuuzhan Vong. Of course, it would help if the Shamed Ones didn't view both Tahiri and Anakin as extensions of the gods they worshipped.

Tahiri retrieved the discarded blade and gently lifted Shaeri's chin so that they were staring eye-to-eye. Immediately, the Shamed One's eyes squeezed shut.

This time, Anakin couldn't help but chuckle aloud, causing Tahiri to immediately spin. "Something funny, Solo?"

"Just thinking. How would you feel if you were told to attack, say, Master Yoda?"

"I'm just trying to teach her how to defend herself."

"I know," Anakin said placating. "But to her, you're her goddess. She won't ever attack you, especially since she's a Shamed One."

Tahiri tilted her head briefly, then a wicked smile came to her face. Anakin reflexively back up several steps. Tahiri tossed him the stun-baton she had been using. "Catch."

Anakin caught the weapon, not missing the fact that Tahiri suddenly issued several harsh orders to the Shamed One before her. An expression of pure horror flashed across Shaeri's face, but Tahiri repeated the order in a sharp bark, and the horror was replaced by determination.

"Tahiri, what did you tell her?" Anakin said warily, watching as Shaeri rose and took the coufee from Tahiri's hand with a purpose. "Tahiri?"

"I just told her that Yun-Shuno would protect her," Tahiri said with a smug grin.

Anakin muttered a curse under his breath as Shaeri began to stalk him. From her stance and the uncertainty on her face, it was clear that Shaeri was only mimicking what she had seen other warriors do. She wasn't backing down, however, much to Anakin's dismay.

"Tahiri, I don't want to hurt her."

"You won't." Tahiri let out a string of Yuuzhan Vong, and Shaeri's posture shifted.
"Giving her advice?"
"Of course."
"So in addition to telling her that Yun-Shuno is watching out for her, what else did you tell her?"
"That you were having improper thoughts about me and she should stop you from defiling me," Tahiri said flippantly, causing Anakin stumble in surprise.
"What?"
And in a blink, Shaeri lunged at him with the training coufee.
"Isn't that an abuse of your godly power?" Anakin strained, rapidly back-pedaling as Shaeri slashed at him with renewed vigor.
Shaeri thrust her weapon forward, and Anakin caught her wrist. Tahiri barked out another command, and Anakin was forced to bring one of his thighs inward to block a very dangerous, low kick.
"Still angry at me for Myrkr?" Anakin said in exasperation.
"What gave me away, Solo?"
Shaeri dropped the coufee into her other hand and swiped at Anakin again; a swipe that aimed just-below-the-waist-level.
"Did you really have to tell her that I was going to defile you?" Anakin said, pushing the determined Shamed One away, causing her to spin around. It would have been far too easy to disarm Shaeri, but he had a feeling that would only make matters worse.
"The training coufee won't cause any permanent damage," Tahiri said lightly, before offering another string of advice in Yuuzhan Vong.
"Partial numbness or a few hours of burning, depending on how she hits you."
Having no desire to experience either, Anakin was forced to bring the stun-baton down to block a slashing attack. Only, as he did, he encountered an invisible wall and was unable to bring the weapon into place. He yelped as the training coufee tagged his thigh, a stinging sensation not unlike the effects of a stun-baton shot through his entire leg.
"That was cheating!" Anakin hopped about on one leg.
"No it wasn't, Yun-Shuno is protecting her. Remember?" Tahiri said airily.
Anakin groaned, and jerked to the side as Shaeri slashed at him once more. Despite her attempts, however, it was clear that Shaeri was tiring.
"Come on, you don't really want to hurt her morale, do you?" Tahiri said playfully. "If you let her win…"

Anakin stumbled once more as Tahiri projected an image directly into his mind. Then, he was jolted out of the images she was sending him by the prod of the training coufee.
Again below the waist-line.
He barely heard Shaeri's shout of triumph through the buzzing aftereffects of the blow she had dealt.
Tahiri's face came into view, she was leaning over him. "You're forgiven."
"Thanks," Anakin rasped.
"You try and get yourself killed again…"
"It won't happen, I promise," Anakin replied, accepting Tahiri's hand of help and allowing her to pull him to his feet.
Tahiri's smile almost made him forget about the numbness caused by the coufee. "You did great. Can you spar with Shaeri again later?"
"Will Yun-Shuno be protecting her again?"
"Naturally. She's only fourteen after all."
Anakin blinked in shock. "What?"
"She's fourteen," Tahiri confirmed. "She wanted a better life than tending the grutchin so she learned through a friend of a friend about the sect of Yun-Shuno."
"And Kadat?" Anakin asked, thinking about his own 'follower.'
"Late twenties," Tahiri shrugged. "That's just a guess though. I'm not the deity he answers to so he doesn't exactly tell me much."
"Is it strange to be a bit envious of you and Shaeri? I mean, you can talk to her and stuff like that."
"I can teach you a few basic words in Yuuzhan Vong," Tahiri said hesitantly. Despite his reassurance of his feelings towards her, she still was cautious to bring up the fact that she was a different Tahiri than the one he had grown up around.
"That'd be a help. When we're hanging out, it'd be nice to know his thoughts."
"What do you two do anyways?"
"Oh, as far as I can tell, he was one of the Shamed Ones who cleaned up after the shaper's experiments. He seems to know a fair bit about it. He's been demonstrating with the materials we have onboard and I've been showing him how my lightsaber, comlink, and the other tech we have, work. Hard to do with the language barrier, but we've worked out a basic system of 'don't touch' and 'it's okay to touch'."
"Only you, Solo." Tahiri shook her head. Then, she stood on her toes and gave him a brief kiss. "Thanks for letting Shaeri win."
"Completely unintentional." Anakin glowered.

"That's what makes you so great a guy." Tahiri rested her forehead against his chest and then stepped back.
A thought struck Anakin. "Are you going to teach Shaeri Jedi fighting styles as well?"
Tahiri blinked. "I never really considered it before. When I'm with her my mind kind of switches over to a Yuuzhan Vong thinking mode. But now that you mention it, I think it's a great idea."
"Somewhere, a Yuuzhan Vong priest just developed a headache."
"No doubt," Tahiri said. She took his hand and looked away, her cheeks pink. "Now come on, Hero-Boy, I believe I promised you a reward."
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The Millennium Falcon, En Route to Borleias
Jaina Solo stirred from her meditation. Her mind, which had been scarred when Tahiri had been in the midst of an identity crisis of sorts, was now mostly healed thanks to her twin. Her twin. Jaina frowned. Despite his return, Jacen still hadn't restored their twin-bond. When she questioned him about it, he had told her he was experimenting with some of the techniques Vergere had taught him.
Jaina was glad to have her twin back, but she could not deny that his capture by the Yuuzhan Vong had changed him. How exactly, she couldn't quite put down.
"Am I interrupting you?"
"Zekk," Jaina glanced over her shoulder to see the young man who had, at one point, been her closest friend. "No, not at all. Come in."
Zekk took a seat and rested his feet on a nearby cargo bin. "Thanks, everyone else was looking too serious or too busy."
"Really? Even Alema?"
"She's in some type of trance with the lambent she got off Coruscant," Zekk nodded, he began to tick each of his fingers. "Masters Durron, Horn, and Skywalker are all discussing the ramifications of Anakin's press release. They're not that happy by the way. Jacen's with Vergere doing some weird exercises. And the cockpit is full up with your parents, 3PO and Tesar."
"Great," Jaina said drolly. "I must have been giving off one of my 'don't bother me' vibes."
"You were."
"Then what are you doing here, Zekk?"
"Wanted to talk," Zekk said softly. "We were friends once, right? Good friends."
Jaina's expression flickered through a myriad of emotions before settling on a stoic expression. "Once, it was a long time ago, Zekk."
"Three years isn't so long."

"You know what I mean."
Jaina refocused on the bulkhead in front of her. "What do you want me to say, Zekk? We're not the same people any more, the both of us."
"That's true." Zekk said more bitterly than he intended. He hastened to correct himself. "I mean, the war has changed many things."
"We're just too different now, Zekk. Maybe, just maybe, if this *kriffing* war hadn't started, if we hadn't loss so many friends, if we had time to talk things over, then we might have had a chance. But this isn't the world of make-believe."
"If, if, if," Zekk countered, slightly heated. "We're talking now, aren't we? We've all lost friends, but you don't see Anakin and Tahiri distancing themselves from each other. I care too much about…our friendship for you to just toss it aside because you're afraid of what might happen."
"And just what am I afraid of, Zekk?" Jaina growled, rising to her feet. "You're the one who's living a delusion. We. Are. Not. Kids. Anymore. I want to take the war to the Vong, you and Jacen thinks it'll lead to the dark side. Anakin shows some initiative in pulling the Jedi Order back together, both you and Jacen say he's being arrogant."
"We can agree to disagree." Zekk stood, emerald green eyes glinting. "It's not like we haven't fought over our beliefs before."
"What do you want, Zekk?"
"I want my best friend back," Zekk said. "I've seen you push yourself in this war, almost to the breaking point. When Anakin was hurt and Jacen was missing, you didn't care that you were this close to going dark!"
"I was worried about my brothers!" Jaina snarled, going toe to toe with him. "Not that that's something you can understand! Who cares about light or dark when you could be losing your family! Your friends? I am *not* losing either of them. I'm not!"
Angry, unshed tears filled Jaina's brandy brown eyes, and she looked away.
"Then let me help you keep them safe! That's what friends do. They look after each other regardless of what the other believes in. Or are you just afraid of letting me in? Afraid that you'll have to add me to that list of dead friends?"
"Get out!" Jaina snapped, her chest pounding a kilometer a second. She stared at her toes as the tears began to run freely down her cheeks. "Get out, please."
Zekk literally felt as if he had reached a crossroads in his life. There was no turning back no matter which path he took. He swallowed and tipped her head back. "I'm not going anywhere, Solo."

Jaina knew what was going to happen, but was too stunned to do anything about it as Zekk's lips met her own. Her eyes grew wide and fluttered for a moment. Just as she began to contemplate returning the kiss, the thought alarmed her and she promptly pulled away, slapping Zekk.

The sound rang loudly in the cargo bay. Then, only their heavy breathing could be heard.

"It's not happening Zekk," Jaina said in a low voice. "Don't *ever* do that again."

"Jaina…"

Jaina, however, brushed past him and stormed out of the room.

[T] [T]

Borleias Occupation, Day 2

The situation on Borleias was stabilizing. The New Republic forces had successfully cleared and secured the biotics facility, allowing for its use as the fleet's headquarters. Courtesy of an intense laser barrage which ensured a secured perimeter, the surrounding jungle had been reduced to steaming piles of burnt foliage and ash. The naturally humid environment did nothing to help the smell, with the stench of ship fuel and burnt vegetation assailing one's nose the moment they stepped out of the biotics facility.

All throughout the clear-cut area, ships were docked for repairs or resupply. And teams of unfortunate men and women stood on patrol for any sign of Yuuzhan Vong survivors.

Wedge stood at the very top of the building, a viewing platform that allowed him to oversee the activity below, awaiting the arrival of several VIPs. He had just concluded a meeting with Tycho, Lando, and the ranking officers of his task force, during which they established a variety of goals. They only intended to hold the planet for as long as it took for the refugees fleeing Coruscant to stream through. Any longer would be an unnecessary risk. The one bright side, was that Wedge was expecting the arrival of help in the form of some old friends.

"Rogue Leader to Antilles. The Falcon, Jade Shadow, and a Yuuzhan Vong frigate have all just dropped out of hyperspace. Jedi Master Skywalker and General Solo send their greetings."

"Thanks Colonel." Wedge felt himself smile for the first time in a long while. "Guide them over to the primary landing zone. I'll be down in a moment."

"Understood, Rogue Leader out."

Wedge took the lift to the ground floor. The fact that he chose to wait outside for their arrival, instead of in the environmentally controlled lobby of the biotics building betrayed his eagerness to greet them. Of

course, there was some alarm at the sight of a Yuuzhan Vong frigate descending near the headquarters, but at least no one opened fire. The sleek outline of the *Jade Shadow* and the not-so-sleek outline of the *Millennium Falcon* momentarily blotted out the sun as they flew by overhead.
The three ships landed in a neat line, and their occupants emerged.
"You guys missed the welcome party." Wedge shook Luke's hand and an exchange of back slapping commenced.
"We were still hung over from the fun we had on Hapes," Mara said drolly, shifting her weight to better support her son.
"That explains why Lando was afraid of loud noises in the meeting I had earlier."
"Looks like you've definitely been busy," Han commented, motioning to the scenery.
"That's one way of putting it," Wedge said distractedly, noticing two scarless Yuuzhan Vong following Han's youngest child from the commandeered frigate. "Those two safe?"
"They think my kid and his girlfriend are gods," Han said dryly. "Not sure if that's a good thing or not."
"Think they'll be able to help Danni Quee with the rest of the Vong?"
Han nodded. "That's as good a place as any. I doubt they can get into too much trouble there."
"Ah, yes, his interview."
"Believe me, after that foolish stunt, you'll be saving that kid's butt by assigning him to the prisoners," Corran Horn said darkly.
"Don't you remember being young and reckless?" Wedge raised an eyebrow.
"Young and reckless, yes. Foolish, no."
"I'll mention that to Mirax next time. She alright?"
"She's helping her father transport the rest of the Jedi young ones from the *Errant Venture* to the *Eclipse.*"
"I heard about the *Venture*. It's a shame. We could have used her."
Corran winced. "I doubt Booster will be bringing his ship into any more combat zones any time soon."
"Anyways, why don't all of you come on in, I can give you a tour of the headquarters and bring you up to speed about our situation here. Your arrival is definitely more than welcome."
[T] [T]
Jacen had just finished unrolling his bedroll when there was a faint knock on the door frame, the door having been kicked in by a Yuuzhan Vong vandal, behind him. He absently reached out with the Force to

see who it was, and felt a tentative tendril reach out in turn. His lips curled into a faint smile.
"Hello again, Danni Quee."
"Hello to you too," Danni replied cheerfully. "I'm glad you remembered me, what with everything that's been going on."
"I take it this invasion has kept you busy?" Jacen said, motioning her in.
"Like you wouldn't believe." She bounced over to a nearby chair. "The main Yuuzhan Vong building had a shaper facility, and my team has been working overtime cataloguing and analyzing what we've found."
"And I heard that the yammosk jammer was successful."
"That was a big relief," Danni nodded, spinning the chair around so her arms were resting atop the backrest. "Anyways, I just wanted to see how you were doing."
"Could be better," Jacen absently rubbed his chest. "Got a slave-seed permanently embedded in my chest."
"It's still there? You haven't had any ill effects?"
"Always the scientist, aren't you," Jacen chuckled, shaking his head. "No, no ill effects. Although I wouldn't try replicating the results any time soon. The seed that was used on me was grown especially for me."
"But you are okay, though?"
"As okay as I can be." Jacen reclined on his bed. "If anything, the seed's actually helped. Vergere's been teaching me see the Force in a new light. Without the seed, I don't think I'd be able to do half the things she's showed me."
"Vergere, the one who poisoned Master Mara Skywalker?"
"I know you're suspicious, but she really is on our side. My uncle is with her now. Hopefully she can show him the same things she's been teaching me."
[T] [T]
Luke felt sick, sick and angry, as he listened to the enigmatic Vergere explain herself. "It was necessary to reduce Jacen to himself, in order that, with every other door closed to him, he might embrace his destiny. Unfortunately, his younger brother intervened before that pointed was reached."
"Unfortunately?" Luke found it difficult to suppress his fury. To say that the interruption of Jacen's torture was 'unfortunate', was not bringing Vergere onto his good side. Neither was saying that Anakin's rescue of his brother was a bad thing. But then, something else Vergere said struck a chord within him.
Destiny. Whenever Luke had thought of that word, it had always been in association with his younger nephew, Anakin. It had been very clear,

ever since the Emperor had touched Anakin in Leia's womb, that Anakin would have a vital role to play. Anakin's destiny was to shape the Jedi Order, to bring it to a new era, or so Luke felt. But the destinies of both Jacen and Jaina had always been more elusive. Did Vergere know something he did not? Despite his mistrust in the Fosh Force user, Luke had a feeling that Vergere was right. That somewhere in the complex weavings of fate, Jacen had a special place.
"And what do you know of Jacen's destiny?"
Vergere pondered a moment, before responding. "I believe that Jacen is intimately connected with the fate of his brother."
"Anakin?"
"Does he have another?"
"How are they connected?"
Vergere's beaked mouth mimicked the expression of a sad smile. "The fall of one will be the rise of the other. Yet, the rise will be a dark rise, while the fall shall be one bright enough to be remembered for centuries to come. They are opposites, and who will rise and who will fall will all depend on the Yuuzhan Vong."
An icy fist clenched Luke's stomach. Of all the things to expect, Vergere's words hadn't been among them. Luke had learned long ago to be wary of prophecy-like statements given from ancient Jedi. They generally ended up being true. From a certain point of view. "You're saying that Anakin and Jacen can destroy the Yuuzhan Vong?"
"Destroy them. Save them. Transform them. Lead them." The tilted eyes opened, gazed expressionlessly into Luke's. "Perhaps all. But though both will succeed, one will fall."
"Quit saying that!" Luke's anger spiked again. "Neither of them will fall to the dark side."
"Believe what you will," Vergere shrugged.
Luke took a moment to control his feelings, his own curiosity getting the better of him. "Can…can either of them open the Yuuzhan Vong to the Force?"
"If it is possible, it is beyond my knowledge."
His mind already spinning from the emotional mix information he had learned from the enigmatic Force user in front of him, Luke felt his heart clench once more. "Then the Yuuzhan Vong will remain… outside."
"It disturbs you?"
"Yes. Of course. The Force is life. All life is the Force. But the Yuuzhan Vong are outside the Force. So are they outside of life as well?"
"What do you think?"

"I think it is easier to deal with enemies from the dark side." Luke narrowed his eyes at Vergere. "And I think you're very good at interrogation. This conversation started with *me* asking you questions."
"If you didn't want me to ask questions." Vergere spun around on the stool she was perched upon. "You should have explained that at the beginning. Now, I believe I have answered enough to earn a respite, have I not?"
"Very well." Luke rose to his feet.
"But, before you leave. I would like to ask you one question. You may answer if you desire."
"Ask."
Vergere's eyes opened and closed very slowly. "If the Force is life. And the Yuuzhan Vong are alive, and you cannot see them in the Force—then is the problem with the Yuuzhan Vong, or is it with your perceptions?"
Luke chose not to answer, nodding politely as he turned to leave.
"Then one last thought, young Master. If all that you have learned prevents you from sensing them, and all that you have learned has been passed on to this generation of Jedi. Then you might ask yourself how, then, can both Jacen and Anakin sense what everyone else cannot?"
[T] [T]
"Are you sure you don't need any additional security?"
"We'll be fine," Anakin reassured the nervous scientist. "These are all Shamed Ones, right?"
"Judging by their lack of implants and scarring. None of them speak Basic so we're not too sure."
"We'll be fine," Tahiri repeated.
"Errr…you are taking those two with you as well? This is a secured part of the base."
Anakin chuckled. "Shaeri and Kadat are with us. They aren't any security risk."
"If you say so, sir. These are the makeshift holding pens." They stopped at what had once been a storage facility for General Derricote's test subjects. The scientist slid a key card, and heavy metal doors opened. "I'll be out here if you need anything. The two of you are braver than I am."
"Thanks for your help."
Anakin and Tahiri stepped into the room. At once, the familiar smell of Yuuzhan Vong assailed both their noses. Wretched looking, scarless Yuuzhan Vong filled the room, their well-being obviously an afterthought as the New Republic settled into their new base. A distant

skylight was the only source of light, its angled panes allowing a faint beam of sun directly into the center of the cramped room.
Anakin and Tahiri's arrival did not go unnoticed. Almost every single eye in the room swung in the direction of the open doorway. Hungry gazes. Desperate gazes. Eyes full of despair and sorrow. Figures shifted in the shadows of the room.
"Yun-Shuno!" A murmur at first, but then growing much louder. *"Shel'o Jeedai!"*
Others wailed, crawling towards Tahiri on their elbows and knees, with their hands clasped together in prayer. *"Sha grunnik ith-har Yun-Shuno!"*
"Wow…"Anakin said, mildly alarmed at the reaction.
"Yeah…" Tahiri nodded, looking overwhelmed.
"I recognized 'Yun-Shuno' and them calling out the 'something-Jedi'."
"Jedi-Who-Was-Shaped," Tahiri said, touching the vertical lines on her forehead.
"And the rest?"
"Prayers ," Tahiri said softly. Gazing at the several dozen Shamed Ones prostrating themselves. "Prayers to Yun-Shuno. Begging her to remove their shame."
There had to be nearly a hundred Shamed Ones in the room, and though a majority stayed where they were, their murmuring continued to keep a low din circulating the room. In the meantime, Tahiri and Anakin had made their way to the center of the room, illuminated by the midday sun streaming down from above. Both their Yuuzhan Vong followers, Kadat and Shaeri stood just outside the illuminated region, their expressions emotionless.
Tahiri glanced at Anakin helplessly, looking to him for guidance.
"Anakin?"
"You're the expert here," Anakin said, the multitude of eyes on him, desperate and pleading, shaking him to his very core.
Just as the crowd began to close in around them, a female voice called out sharply in Yuuzhan Vong. As one, the others seem to shrink back. From the shadows, a single figure hesitantly approached the two young Jedi.
"Anakin? Sen Anakin Solo?"
"[Yes, he is]," Tahiri responded, switching to Yuuzhan Vong.
"*Anakin…from…Yag'Dhul? Zhaelae ei Jeedai-Who-Was-Shaped? "*
Their eyebrows rose at the awkward use of Basic and they exchanged another glance. Tahiri nodded carefully. "Yes."
A slender Yuuzhan Vong, with a trio of poorly healed burns on each cheek and a trio of more deliberate looking cuts on her forehead,

stepped into the sunlight. Anakin saw that her markings mimicked the scars on Shaeri's forehead. In a low voice, he murmured. "A credit says that she's in the sect of 'you'."
"You're probably right," Tahiri replied distractedly. The Shamed One in front of them looked familiar, but she couldn't place her. Whether the Shamed One was from the memories of her Yuuzhan Vong self or otherwise, Tahiri wasn't sure. As the Shamed One fell to one knee in front of Tahiri, the blond Jedi stepped forward. "[Rise, please do not bow before me.]"
Anakin watched with some anticipation as Tahiri and the one before her exchanged a flurry of words. After only the third exchange, Tahiri's eyes lit up and a smile appeared on her face.
"Anakin! It's Taan!" Tahiri whirled around to Anakin, bubbling with happiness.
"Taan." Anakin blinked.
"The one who helped us at Yag'Dhul, dummy!"
Anakin did briefly recall the young Shamed One he, Master Horn, and Tahiri had met on the captured scout ship. She had provided them with information about the Shamed Ones and had helped them thwart the Yuuzhan Vong at Yag'Dhul. He had always assumed that Taan had perished when the Givin had vented the station of atmosphere. But apparently she had survived somehow. He was about to ask Tahiri a question, but then realized that she had returned to conversation with the Shamed One as if they were long lost friends.
"Tahiri?"
"Long story or short?"
"We have time."
"Taan's the local leader of the loosely translated 'The-Jedi-Are-Our-Salvation' sect leader, with an emphasis on the Jedi being agents of Yun-Shuno. Since Yag-Dhul, Taan's been shipped from place to place, spreading the word of her encounter with us."
"Wait a minute. How many sects are there? I mean Kadat and Shaeri are in separate ones, and Taan's in a different one too?"
Tahiri rubbed her forehead. "Sorry, a mistranslation. The 'The-Jedi-Are-Our-Salvation' is more a social movement than anything else. Shaeri and Taan are in the same sect, both venerate Yun-Shuno and… well… see me as her avatar." Tahiri conversed with Taan again, then looked back to Anakin. "As far as I can tell, there are Shamed Ones who venerate different Jedi as avatars of different gods. You are Yun-Ne'Shel's avatar, Jaina is Yun-Harla's, and Jacen is Yun-Yammka's."
"That's the second time I've been referred to Yun-Ne'Shel. But I haven't heard too much of him."

Tahiri smirked slightly. "That's because he is a she. Well, kind of."
"Tahiri," Anakin raised an eyebrow.
"Yun-Ne'Shel is gender neutral, but has a feminine personality. She's the goddess of life and creativity."
"That's not so bad."
"She's also considered one of the more foolish deities in the Yuuzhan Vong pantheon," Tahiri added dryly.
"Of course."
"Anyways, Taan is willing to help us talk with the others here. She has four followers at this base."
"Four?"
"It's better than none."
"No, it's just that I had hoped these cults were more widespread."
"They are," Tahiri said reassuringly. "Taan tells me that there are probably at least one or two cultists on most major ships and in many of the Yuuzhan Vong bases."
"It's a start." Anakin shrugged.
Taan approached Anakin and bowed her head politely. In stuttering Basic, she managed to get out a greeting he could understand. "I… happy…*Fas! Bos sos si vonge?*"
"'To see,'" Tahiri prompted gently.
"Yes," Taan said with an eager nod.
"I happy to see Anakin Solo…alive."
"I'm glad you survived Yag'Dhul," Anakin smiled gently, touching her shoulder. "Are you okay?"
Taan blinked several times, digesting the words, before nodding. "I well. Mine will fight for the *Jeedai.*"
"You've been learning Basic?"
"I get…servants? No, slaves. I get slaves to teach me. Language of Shamed One's saviors."
Anakin let out a breath. "Language of the saviors, right. No pressure."
Tahiri smiled gently and shook her head. Smoothly slipping back into the Yuuzhan Vong language, she addressed Taan once more. "[You mentioned that your people will be willing to fight for us. How many will follow?]"
"Some," Taan started in Basic. But then, after she struggled for the next couple of words, continued in her native tongue. "[Those who follow Yun-Shuno, the sect of the Jedi-Who-Was-Shaped, will treat your word as that of our goddess. Others will follow once they see that the gods are on the side of the *Jeedai*.]"
"Great," Tahiri beamed at Anakin. "How'd you like to have more sparring partners?"

"Building an army?"
"What better way to make the warriors and the Supreme Overlord afraid than if they hear that the Jedi are training the Shamed Ones to fight?"
"If they do this, a whole lot of Shamed Ones will suffer," Anakin pointed out. "They'll come down hard on *all* Shamed Ones."
"We prepared to die for the *Jeedai*." Taan spoke up. "We already Shamed. Before the *Jeedai*, death only way to regain status. If the higher castes begin to kill Shamed Ones, then it will show their fear of us."
Anakin blinked. "Okay, but until I talk with Uncle Luke and General Antilles, can we start off small?"
Tahiri cocked her head at him. "Like what?"
"Language lessons?" Anakin shrugged. "Maybe Taan can teach Shaeri and Kadat Basic? I'd rather not start the whole 'training an army of Shamed Ones' routine until we actually have some sort of plan into place."
"If we get the Shamed Ones on our side, then we'd have a powerful ally," Tahiri pointed out.
"Let's hope the Jedi Masters see the same thing."
[T] [T]
"Absolutely not." Han objected
"At least you waited until after the evening meal to bring us this plan," Corran said wryly.
"You are sure the Shamed Ones can be trusted?" Luke asked diplomatically.
"You've had worse ideas," Mara shrugged.
Kyp reclined on a bench and also shrugged. "It sounds like a great idea. But can you carry it out?"
"There will be many casualties among the Shamed Ones once the plan is set into motion." Wedge finished.
"There probably will be even more with the second part of the plan," Anakin said, motioning to his older sister.
Jaina stood. "You probably heard that on Hapes I adopted the title of Yun-Harla, the Yuuzhan Vong trickster goddess. When I did, the Vong force that broke away from the main fleet decided to attack me instead of continue on to what would have been a defenseless Hapes. This allowed our forces to rally and catch the Vong in a pincer attack. I propose that we do something similar here on Borleias."
"You're going to continue the 'I'm a Vong goddess' act?" Han said sharply.

"It'll have to be convincing to keep the Vong's attention." Leia said warily, not liking the idea of placing a giant target on her daughter's back.
"I know, it's why I want the *Trickster*."
"The Yuuzhan Vong frigate you captured?" Tycho spoke up.
"Yes," Jaina nodded. "I know we can learn a lot from it if we strip it down and turn it into a science experiment. But I think we can use it to help with my Yun-Harla act."
Han opened his mouth to object, but Lando spoke up before he could say anything.
"It *will* reinforce Jaina's role," Lando glanced cautiously at Han and Leia, then decided to bite the bullet and continue. "If this is going to work, we'll need to go all out. If the Vong have any spies watching us, which we know they do, they'll have to literally see us bow to Jaina, treat her as a living, breathing goddess."
"Any ideas?" Wedge asked.
Lando nodded. "For starters, give her your quarters." That raised many eyebrows. "I'm sure that Corran will agree that, from an intelligence perspective, a sign of superiority for many soldiers is how big one's private quarters are. You're the famous Wedge Antilles, slayer of a Death Star. But you're nothing compared to Jaina Solo, the goddess Yun-Harla."
"She will also need her own squadron to escort her when she is not in the *Trickster*," Jagged pointed out.
"Not just a squadron," Corran corrected. "But her own servants. She's a goddess, and if what we know of the Yuuzhan Vong is true, then she will not be doing her own menial tasks."
"If you wanted to get out of your chores, you didn't have to come up with this grand scheme," Han said, trying to be humorous, but feeling nauseous at the same time. He had already come close to losing both his sons, and the plan everyone seemed to be agreeing on was definitely upping the risk-factor on his daughter.
"And what better way to show that she is a goddess than by having a Jedi Master under her command," Kyp said. "I take it we're giving her Twin Suns Squadron then?"
"That's the best choice," Corran nodded. "The name itself already invokes the 'twin' imagery that the Yuuzhan Vong are so wary of."
Jaina, who's head had been moving back and forth to follow the conversation, finally spoke up. "So I can act as Yun-Harla?"
Leia arched an eyebrow. "Try not to enjoy it too much."
"Of course mom. There's no way I'll enjoy this role at all. Nope, it'll be terrible being treated as a goddess."

"I can see you get your acting skills from your father," Leia deadpanned.
Jaina matched Leia's faint smile, then motioned to her younger brother. "And Anakin and Tahiri's plan?"
"As long as the Shamed Ones are ready to accept the risks, I don't really have any arguments against it," Wedge shrugged. "You've vouched for the ones we captured, and we can use all the help we can get."
"There is the part where they're only doing this because they think that the Jedi are gods," Luke pointed out softly. "We would be deceiving a good majority of those who join up."
"If Jaina's going to be running around calling herself as Yun-Harla, we can't exactly come out and say otherwise," Corran said.
"Danni, you have some insight into the Yuuzhan Vong. What's your opinion?" Leia asked.
Danni was silent for a moment. Though nervous now that all eyes were on her, she felt the tendrils of support coming from the other Force sensitives. Taking a deep breath, she answered. "From what Tahiri has told me, it seems like they believe that the Jedi are their salvation. Just the existence of us Jedi challenges the Yuuzhan Vong belief system. Even if the Jedi came out and said that they weren't gods, the actual effect on the Shamed Ones would be minimal. In fact, it would probably have the opposite effect on the warrior and priestly castes and strengthen the Yuuzhan Vong war effort."
"So you are for this crazy plan?" Mara asked for clarification.
"As wrong as it is to continue the deception, at this point, what matters is that we give the Shamed Ones something to believe in other than what the priestly caste has been forcing on them. They are willing to fight for themselves and for the Jedi. I think we should let them."
Wedge took a visual poll of those present. Though some looked dubious, there were no longer any who were outright against the plan. He motioned to the others. "Okay, then unless anyone strenuously objects, we'll proceed with both plans. Jaina, since both Corran and Mara have experience with intelligence matters, start consulting with them about how to best transform you into a Yuuzhan Vong goddess. Danni, Lando, I'd like you to help as well."
"On it."
"Sure thing."
"Anakin, Tahiri, I assume you already have some idea as to what to do?"
"More or less."

"Is there anything I can do to help with those plans? If the two of you manage to pull it off, we'll definitely have struck a serious blow to the Yuuzhan Vong."
"We'll need some space to train them," Tahiri spoke out. "Preferably somewhere outside."
"We want any Yuuzhan Vong spying on this base to see them," Anakin added in support.
"Done, I'll clear one of the landing berths for you."
"Also," Anakin turned his gaze to Luke. "It might help if some of the senior Jedi drop by from time to time to give advice. Tahiri and I may know a little about the Yuuzhan Vong, but we don't have the experience of a Jedi Master. It would also benefit the Shamed Ones if they learned different fighting styles, not just what Tahiri and I know."
Luke nodded in consent, while Mara spoke, "I'll be up first then. How many are we expecting?"
"Only a handful at first," Anakin answered. "The rest will probably join once we defeat whatever Yuuzhan Vong force tries to retake Borleias."
"Proof of your godliness?" Kyp said lightly.
"Yup."
Wedge smiled faintly at the optimism of the younger generation. He clearly recalled the time *he* had been that hopeful. Of course, that optimism was one of the main reasons why he had charged into two Death Stars and brought down a galactic-wide empire. He wondered what he would have done had he been as old as he was now.
"Anything else?" Wedge said, inputting a few notes into the datapad in his hand.
"Not that I can think of." Anakin shook his head.
"Jacen, any ideas?" Jaina asked of her quieter twin.
Jacen, who was in the back of the room, very slowly unfolded his arms.
"Do you think I can I help with the training of the Shamed Ones?"
Anakin tensed. "Why?"
"Anakin," Tahiri whispered in soft reproach.
"You said it yourself, they could benefit from different points of view."
Jacen met his brother's emotionless gaze. "Plus, it would give us a chance to talk."
"We don't have anything to talk about," Anakin replied. Tahiri placed a hand on his arm. "But it's not like I can stop you from helping. Do what you want."
"Thank you."
"Alright then," Wedge took control of the conversation again. "We don't know when the next Yuuzhan Vong fleet will arrive. But we can expect an attack between now and when we pull out. I only intend to stay

here for another week or so, depending on how long it takes the stream of refugees to trickle through. Priorities will go to these new plans and scouring the jungle for any Vong look-outs. If there are no further questions, lets meet up again tomorrow, same time, to discuss any progress or problems that have popped up."
[T] [T]
Borleias Occupation, Day 3
"For once, do you think we'll actually meet a friendly politician? And I mean really friendly, not just the Nerf-and-Wookie show they put on for everyone they meet."
"Most of those types of politicians don't last too long," Han responded to Tahiri's question with some amount of amusement.
"They either grow out of it or don't get elected to another term," Lando added, his eyes bloodshot. "Now can you lower your voices, my head hurts?"
"Want me to whistle up some caf?" Mara said glibly, holding Ben against her chest.
"You whistle, my head will explode and decorate the hallway with my brains."
Mara shook her head. "No brains, just skull fragments."
The group was walking towards the conference room Wedge had set up to accommodate the recently arrived members of the New Republic Advisory Council. Of course, no one had a good feeling about the arrival of the survivors of the government they served. Most of the survivors hadn't exactly used legitimate means to escape Coruscant
"So tell me again why the Advisory Council wants us to attend?" Anakin said, being one of three young Jedi specifically 'invited' to attend the briefing.
"I'd like to know that as well," Jaina agreed. "They don't really need Anakin, Jacen, or I there, do they?
"Who knows what they have planned," Han shrugged. "Pwoe has always been a slippery guy."
"Because he's a Quarren?" Jacen said dryly.
"That too."
Han, Lando, Mara, and Leia entered the conference room with the younger Jedi close behind. Wedge, Gavin Darklighter, Tycho, Danni, and Luke were already present, as were Corran and the Advisory Council delegation.
"Sorry, took a while to track them down," Han said lightly, jerking a thumb at the group behind him.
"Nothing to be sorry for," Wedge said, and looked up at one of the council guards. "Doors."

The guard looked at Pwoe, received his nod, and closed the doors.
"Now we can start," Wedge said.
Pwoe puffed out his chest, as if it made him more important. "Yes, of course. First, I want to reassure you all that the government of the New Republic is in fine working order. Drawing on the emergency authority that has fallen to us with Borsk Fey'lya's death, and with the temporary disarray the Senate finds itself in, the Advisory Council has assumed the reins of power. We are now formulating plans to reorganize our armed forces and retake Coruscant. We are in communication with planetary governments from all over the New Republic, which are acknowledging our leadership and awaiting orders."
As Pwoe waited for a response, Jacen leaned over to his sister. "Think he actually memorized that entire bit on his shuttle ride over?"
When only an uncomfortable silence greeted Pwoe's proclamation, the Quarren's beady eyes darted about the room in disappointment before he continued. "First of all, we wish to congratulate you, General Antilles, on your success here at Borleias."
"Thank you but…"
"We would also like to extend our congratulations to Anakin Solo, for carrying out a successful mission at Myrkr, for rescuing his brother, and for providing crucial technical knowledge to help protect our valuable ally, the Hapes Consortium," Pwoe said, speaking over Wedge's objection. "Though this is hardly the proper time or place, his contributions to the New Republic cannot go unrewarded. If Grand Master Skywalker does not object, it would be in all our best interests if Anakin Solo is promoted to the rank of full Jedi Knight immediately."
"Wouldn't that be overstretching your power, Chief of State Pwoe?" Corran said. "I was unaware that the office of the Chief of State could dictate the internal affairs of the Jedi Order."
Pwoe smiled thinly at Corran. "Of course, I do not presume to have such power. I was merely recommending the best course of action for us all. Surely *you* do not believe that Anakin Solo should remain unrecognized for all of his accomplishments of late?"
Anakin was about to speak up, but Han placed a quick hand on the teen's shoulder and shook his head slightly. Anakin sat back in his chair and, through the intentions of the others in the room, watched several very, and if the situation hadn't been so serious, amusing, variations of Pwoe's imminent death. One of which involved a very creative use of detonator cord and the energy pack from a blaster. He shook himself from the hostile intentions of the others and refocused on the conversation.

"But, as I said earlier, Anakin's promotion can wait until we have time for a proper ceremony. Of course, his siblings should share in the honor, it is only fair after all. For now," Pwoe turned his attention back to Wedge. "I need to hear the details of what you have accomplished here."

Almost monotonously, and with as few words as possible, Wedge briefed the Advisory Council members on the situation on Borleias. As he spoke, the Advisory Council members whispered to on another, as if they were only half interested in what he was saying.

When Wedge was through, Pwoe harrumphed with approval. "You've done very well in seizing the initiative, in anticipating the needs of the New Republic and acting on them. Not that I wouldn't expect that of you. But now…"

Anakin rolled his eyes the moment Pwoe said those two words. There was always something else. As Pwoe ordered Wedge to hold Borleias at all costs, and then went on to promise reinforcements at a later date, Anakin's eyebrows rose. He could see that several others in the room had realized what he had. He was unsurprised when Wedge, the veteran of many battles, not all of them physical, refused the order.

"As an officer of the New Republic, you cannot do that!" Pwoe objected, looking like a fish out of water.

"I'll resign my commission."

"In this period of crisis, that could be construed as an act of treason," Pwoe said. Anakin was mildly surprised at the level of hostility and anger irradiating from the vicinity of *both* Pwoe and Wedge. Pwoe, on one hand, was absolutely furious at being refused. While Wedge, on the other hand, clearly was fed up with the Quarren's not so subtle way to get them all killed.

After several more back and forth barbs and political posturing, it was clear that Wedge had the upper hand. Pwoe took a deep breath and sat back in his chair. He folded his hands in front of him, though the act was more to prevent himself from making a fist than anything diplomatic. "All right then, in the spirit of cooperation, I'm prepared to hear what it is you want to ask for."

There was some more hemming and hawing on Pwoe's part, but eventually Wedge was able to force the new Chief of State to give him the forces and material he desired. Anakin knew that this group of politicians had truly given up when they granted the *Lusankya*, a recently restored Super Star Destroy, to Wedge's group. Giving up the best ship in the fleet for a suicide mission was rather telling.

"General, I deplore your methods and your arrogance. I don't imagine you can expect much in the way of a military career once this assignment is done."
Wedge nodded. His expression was understanding, sympathetic, or at least it appeared to be on the surface. Through the Force Anakin could tell that, inwardly, Wedge was doing the equivalent of someone sticking out his tongue at the Chief of State. "But you accept."
"Yes. We accept. It is my pleasure to relieve you of command of Fleet Group Three, even if I must leave you your current rank and command of this garrison."
"Once your order confirming the terms I specified have been broadcast over the HoloNet to our armed forces, you can consider me to have accepted, too." Wedge glanced at a datapad Tycho handed to him. "But I recommend that be soon. Rogue Squadron has reported sighting what may be a Yuuzhan Vong scout ship, and we had a Yuuzhan Vong frigate enter the upper atmosphere of the planet just yesterday. This planet will be a war zone very soon."
"Yes, well, I wish you luck in defending Borleias, but I do not think you will need it," Pwoe said with a game smile. "Now, you may leave to coordinate the details with your underlings. I wish to talk to Anakin Solo and his brother and sister."
It was clear that Pwoe wanted to establish even a modicum of superiority after having terms dictated to *him*. The dismissal in front of everyone, and his smug demeanor, nearly had the New Republic looking for a new Chief of State. Fortunately for the Quarren, Wedge had more control than that. Nodding curtly, Wedge stepped aside and motioned for the others.
"I wish to speak *only* to Anakin and his siblings," Pwoe stressed, locking eyes with Corran when the man remained seated. "My aides will assist in delivering the orders. Perhaps you can be of some help to them."
Once the room was clear of everyone, Tahiri being convinced to leave with Mara, the three Solo children were left alone with Pwoe.
"How can we help you, Chief of State?" Jaina asked, when the Quarren simply leaned back in his chair.
"Please, Pwoe is just fine, Jedi Jaina Solo."
"Then if it's not too presumptuous, 'Jaina' is fine as well."
"Of course, of course," Pwoe said amicably. "Might I say that I am relieved that your family made it out of both Coruscant and Hapes alive?"
"Thank you."
"You are most welcome." Pwoe straightened and clasped his webbed hands together. "Now then, I am not sure if you have been watching

the latest HoloNet news reports, but the people have been talking as of late."
"Is that so?" Jaina raised an eyebrow and glanced in the direction of her younger brother.
"Quite," Pwoe nodded, matching her gaze. "You, young Anakin Solo, have stirred up a whole gundark's nest worth of debate. You will be surprised at just how much support you have among the masses."
"Is that why you are pushing for my advancement to Jedi Knight?" Anakin asked.
Pwoe tilted his head forward in acknowledgement. "Partially. The people are indeed clamoring for a more transparent Jedi Order. But that is not the primary reason why. The people need a hero to believe in. Despite your denials to the contrary, *you*, Anakin Solo, are that hero. You are strong, intelligent, and can do much more than myself or any average person can. By not granting you the acknowledgements that you deserve, your uncle, Master Skywalker, has only been harming our cause. By making you a Jedi Knight, not only will the people understand that their government shares their views, but it will also give them an example of a different type of Jedi. One who is not afraid to get things done."
"Then what can I do for you, Chief of State?"
"Though I will be leaving with the Advisory Council shortly, I have made arrangements to have several HoloNet journalists and reporters come to Borleias. I would consider it a personal favor if you would humor them, show them the world of the Jedi that your uncle and the other masters try so hard to hide."
"These journalists, they do realize the danger of being here?" Jacen said, barely hiding his disbelief at the political games the Quarren was playing, even now.
"Of course," Pwoe said. "They know the risks. Look at it this way, they will help your Jedi Order gain the support it needs by documenting your defense of Borleias through the eyes of the Jedi, namely Anakin Solo, your sister, and yourself."
"You're going to be turning this into a reality HoloNet show," Jaina said, her eyes narrowed as a surge of protectiveness for her younger brother welled up in her and overrode her sense of diplomacy. "Jedi don't need to glorify what they do. And Anakin certainly doesn't need the added pressure"
"But if you hide away, how will the public ever know anything about you as individual people?" Pwoe said with a smug grin. "If you deny them this opportunity for a very public viewing of your Order's greatest heroes, they will only wonder what secrets the Jedi have to hide. You

can scarcely afford to alienate the public now. Not after the progress Anakin has made."
"But..."
"Jaina, it's alright," Anakin said softly. He turned briefly back to Pwoe. "Can we have a moment to discuss this amongst ourselves?"
"Of course," Pwoe said magnanimously, obviously expecting a victory.
Anakin motioned to his siblings, and they moved to the opposite side of the room. In a hushed voice, Anakin explained his reasoning. "We may not like it, but the Chief of State is right. We need the support of the public to stop groups like the Peace Brigade from picking off our members. If we shut out everyone else, we'll continue to weaken ourselves and our position in the galaxy. It's one of the reasons why I gave that interview back on Hapes. We need to keep the public interested in the Order. To let them know that there was more to us than the lies the Peace Brigade have been spreading. Pwoe's journalists can go a long way in helping our cause."
"Anakin," Jaina hissed. "Not that I don't agree with you that the Order needs some drastic changing, but I doubt Pwoe's hand-picked reporters will be unbiased. There is just as great a chance that they'll twist our words around and use it to further hurt the order.
"And if we stay silent, they'll make up their own words and opinions about us anyway," Anakin pointed out tiredly. "Look, I know both of you hate politics. I do too. But Pwoe and his friends are the last surviving leaders of our recognized goverment at the moment. A government that has just lost its capital and is on the run. Uncle Luke is the leader of a galaxy-wide distrusted and reviled order that has neither a political presence, public support, or a representative in the government. Given the current conditions, can Pwoe really afford to be associated with a relatively unknown organization led by a man so universally unpopular? You both heard the briefing, and know that he expects us to die here. He doesn't have to offer to help us, but he is anyway. It's why I think whatever spin his reporters will put on their stories will be a positive one. This way, any surviving Jedi will either feel loyal to the government and be easier to betray, or follow in our footsteps and become martyrs for the New Republic. On the off chance that we do survive this place, any media coverage will only help the Order. And the Order definitely needs all the support it can get."
"Anakin's right," Jacen said after several seconds of thought. "Currently, the public is only interested in the Order and what we do because of Anakin's trial and the information he gave out in his interview. That interest will only last for so long before it returns to the apathy and indifference that has permeated the majority of this war. If

we want to connect the Jedi Order to the broader public, now might be our only chance."
"I still don't like it," Jaina glanced at Pwoe in annoyance. "I mean, security risk aside, this is a really bad idea. But, it's clear we don't really have a choice in the matter."
"Don't worry, all we have to do is play along for now. I'll come up with something," Anakin said with a small wink, in an attempt to lighten up the mood.
Jaina was slightly molllified. "I am so not voting for him the next time elections come around."
The three returned to Pwoe.
"So, my young Jedi friends, have you come to a decision?"
"We have." Jaina nodded.
"You've already cleared it with General Antilles?" Jacen asked.
"The reporters will be arriving with the additional forces he requested, and will be following the three of you around, not the general." Pwoe replied calmly. "If he has any issues with their presence, tell him to send a message to my office."
"We'll look forward to their arrival, then." Anakin said noncommittally.
"Excellent. Then, if all goes well here, I look forward to seeing you on my home planet."
"Likewise," Anakin quipped with a strained smile.
The Quarren clapped his hands together, smiled toothily one last time, then exited after his subordinates.
[T] [T]
Minutes after the Advisory Council's shuttle left orbit, everyone had once again returned to the conference room, a tense feeling filling the air.
"Okay," Danni said slowly. "What just happened?"
"The Advisory Council just told us to go and die for them," Jaina said stiffly, still not forgiving Pwoe for forcing herself and her brothers into a corner.
Wedge shook his head. "It's worse than that. Pwoe just gave us the *Lusankya,* the navy's biggest surviving warship. Additionally, he is willing to give us enough matériel to noticeably diminish the New Republic's ability to defend itself from the Yuuzhan Vong. On an analytical level, does Borleias, or the refugees from Coruscant, warrant that much expenditure?"
Jaina's expression darkened. "No."
"They've given up already, haven't they?" Anakin said.

"Precisely," Wedge nodded. "The people who call themselves the Advisory Council have already decided that the Yuuzhan Vong will become the dominant force in this galaxy."
"Considering how much political power they wield, that's not a good sign," Leia spoke up. "If, what Pwoe says is true, then the member systems who have acknowledged the Advisory Council as legitimate, may just go along with their conclusion."
"Not that I'm arguing your point, but why give in to your demands at all?" Han questioned. "Wouldn't it be easier to get rid of our military by throwing us piece-meal at the Yuuzhan Vong controlled systems?"
"They want the New Republic to go down fighting," Jaina said. "They probably realize that the Yuuzhan Vong won't respect them at all if they just say 'here you go, rule us please.' If General Antilles is successful in mounting a legendary defense against great odds, the Yuuzhan Vong just might be impressed enough to offer terms."
"Doesn't Pwoe realize that the Yuuzhan Vong will kill off the leadership once they take control?" Tahiri said, unable to believe the politician's thinking. "No matter what terms they offer, him staying alive won't be part of the deal."
"That almost makes me want to agree to his plan," Mara said dryly.
"Chief of State Pwoe's plan would mean we'd all be dead too," Leia pointed out.
"I did say 'almost.'"
"If you knew what Pwoe was doing, why did *you* agree to his orders?" Luke asked Wedge, smiling slightly at the banter between his sister and wife.
"The Advisory Council was right about one thing, the Pyria system does need to be held. The Vong currently have the momentum in this war, and we need to slow them down before they completely overwhelm us. Additionally, we *do* have to stay here a good while to ensure that as many refugees survive as possible. The question I want to ask is, what can we do to limit the damage caused by the Advisory Council? I don't plan to die here, but on the flip-side, I won't be able to hold Borleias either. This best I can manage here is to make it so that little Vong children whimper when they hear the name Borleias."
"There are…"
"We can…" Luke and Anakin spoke at the same time. Both gestured for the other to continue.
"Go ahead, Anakin," Luke said. "I sense that we were thinking along the same lines."
Anakin glanced at his uncle, then straightened and nodded. "To put it bluntly, we'll need to drastically change our fighting style if we want to

have any hope of fighting this war. Since the start, the New Republic has been on the defensive, a reactionary force and not a pre-emptive one. In nearly all of the fleet-to-fleet engagements, the New Republic has come out on the losing end. Even if our forces managed to beat back the Yuuzhan Vong, they were too weakened to hold the area they were protecting."
"I agree," Luke nodded. "There are generally two types of fighting styles, hard and soft. As a government, the New Republic forces use the hard method. We have set bases, engage the enemy fleets with fleets of our own, but at the same time, we are constrained by the bureaucracy that comes with being a government-operated force."
"And the soft type?" Lando said.
"Back in the days of the Rebel Alliance, we used the soft fighting method; hidden resources, ambushes and traps, avoiding stand-and-fight battles whenever we could," Luke answered.
"So, the two of you are saying…what? That we need to go back to those Rebel Alliance tactics?" Lando said hesitantly, leaning forward and stroking his chin in thought.
"That's exactly it."
"But the Rebel Alliance is gone," Danni said. "It *became* the New Republic."
"And that's the problem," Anakin replied. "Since the Alliance became the New Republic, its entire military has been operating with the same tactics in every battle. Tactics that even a non-military person can see, aren't working."
"Little Brother," Jaina said warily. "It almost sounds like you're suggesting we just reform the Alliance right under the noses of the New Republic High Command."
"We need to do something different," Anakin countered. "We can only run for so long before we run out of places to hide."
"Anakin's right," Luke added. "What we need to do is not just *use* the tactics of the Rebel Alliance, but we need to *become* the Rebel Alliance again."
"That's treason," Jaina said, though from the lack of heat in her voice it was obvious she was conflicted about it.
"I think," Wedge said softly. "That we're right at the edge of annihilation. Will it matter if we're branded traitors, if there is no one left alive because we failed to act? Our entire culture, our history, our children…" Wedge's voice hoarsened slightly as his thoughts turned to his missing daughters. "Everything and everyone we value will be wiped away by the Yuuzhan Vong. Anakin pointed out that everything we have done so far has failed to stop this from happening. Delayed it,

yes. But at our current rate, we will be destroyed, absorbed by the Yuuzhan Vong and forgotten. I won't let that happen."
He drew his blaster and sent it spinning at the center of the conference table. "Anyone need a blaster? That's mine. I'm willing to put it out there because there's no one in this room I'd hesitate to give it to, or to put my life in the hands of. And that's how I propose we build this Resistance. We'll set up contacts, bases, and cells the old Rebel Alliance Way."
"While the New Republic is grinding themselves down at the front lines of the Yuuzhan Vong, we'll strike the Vong where they're weak," Mara added with a smirk of approval.
"A mix of hard and soft," Luke said.
"So we are in agreement then?" Wedge said, catching the eye of each person in the room. He received nods of supports as well as grim smiles with each person he passed. "All right. From now on We're the Inner Circle. Things said here don't go outside. Others we know we trust and need, like Booster Terrik, when we have a chance to contact him."
Corran winced at the prospect. "He'll probably leap at the chance to become a legitimate law-breaker and rebel."
Wedge chuckled. "I'm sure he will. Now, we need to come up with some soft-style fighting techniques. We know the Yuuzhan Vong are coming here. We need to bait them, make them think they have the upper hand so we can learn and study their techniques."
"Depending on when they arrive, we can also use the Shamed Ones and Jaina to make them even more predictable," Anakin added. "As disciplined as they are, getting them angry is always a good thing."
"You and Tycho can help me form up some type of strategy," Wedge said, warming to the idea. "I need a me and I need a them."
Anakin nodded as Tycho took a deep breath. "Well, we can be them just as well as we can be you. Or you can be them with one of us, while the other is you. Or you can be you with help from me or him, and the other can be them."
"You've been wanting to say something like that for a while, haven't you?" Anakin said dryly.
"Thank you!" Lando blurted. "I thought I was the only one confused."
"Oh, you still are," Anakin said brightly. "I understood him perfectly."
Tycho inclined his head at Anakin while Lando pouted. "I think we'll get along just fine, Jedi Solo. We're talking about a game of tactics, Lando. The enemy will be analyzing us just as much as we will be them. The trick is to guess how he will react to the tactics we're using and come

up with tactics he wouldn't expect, all the while figuring out the weaknesses and strengths of the enemy."
"We give the enemy commander just enough of our hand to make him think he has us figured out, then get the drop on him when he overplays himself," Anakin finished.
"Right," Wedge said, having glanced back and forth at the youngest Solo and his XO. "So in our planning sessions, Tycho and Anakin are going to be me, while I play the role of whoever the Yuuzhan Vong commander will be."
"I get it," Lando said. "In fact, I get it better than you realize. You're playing sabacc."
"Only, if we lose, we die," Anakin said grimly.
"We'll lose a lot more than that," Wedge corrected. "So let's hope we can come up with a winning hand."
[T] Chapter End [T]
A\N: So begins Rebel Dream. Mostly a set-up chapter, I'll be vaguely following the canon plot for this part of the story but minimizing many aspects, expanding on others, and adding my own plotlines. My version of Rebel Dream is only four chapters long. There is a *Traitor*-esque intermission chapter, a two week break between updates, and then a three chapter Rebel Stand.
Memo to self, when adding scenes in the document preview/editor section, not saving and accidently hitting the tab key, then backspace=several hundred words that need to be retyped...
Next chapter, next week. Reviews happily welcomed.

ADA 12

Twelve
[T] [T]
Borleias Occupation, Day 4-5
The humid and hot nature of the surrounding jungle meant that tempers easily flared. Despite the uneasy truce between Anakin and Jacen, the tension between the two of them was clear.
"Jacen, I know what I'm doing!" Anakin said hotly. "Why don't you go and do something useful?"
"They're not soldiers, Anakin," Jacen argued. "You can't seriously expect them to just pick up a weapon and join the war effort?"
"I know they're not soldiers! But the fastest way for them to learn is in actual combat! And we need people patrolling the jungle perimeter!"
"That's the fastest way to get them killed!"
"We don't have the luxury of sending them to a training academy!"

"And we're trying to keep as many of them alive as possible, not use them for cannon fodder."
"You don't trust me!"
"And you're not listening!"
"Enough!" Mara Skywalker stepped in. "Anakin, Jacen, take a break and cool off!"
Both Anakin and Jacen briefly glared at Mara, but the Jedi Master didn't back down.
"We're lucky enough that Tahiri and Danni took the Shamed Ones away before you started shouting loud enough to wake up the dead." Mara said darkly. "The two of you fighting is not helping any one."
"Jacen keeps undermining…"
"Anakin thinks that the Shamed Ones are his personal…"
"Enough," Mara repeated. "I don't want to hear it. The two of you have been at each other's throats since yesterday and I have had enough. Jacen, this project is Anakin and Tahiri's. If he is doing something objectionable, I am sure others will speak out. Anakin, Jacen isn't questioning your abilities to lead or teach, he is only asking you to consider other possibilities. If the two of you can't work together… "
"I know!" Anakin said in exasperation.
"Anakin," Mara arched an eyebrow.
Anakin looked away and exhaled. "Look, I'm going to go cool off over at that waterfall we secured the other day. Jacen, do whatever you want."
"Anakin," Jacen started, but Anakin was already jogging away. Murmuring to himself, Jacen shook his head. "Just great. Can't he see that I'm trying to help him?"
"Maybe he doesn't want your help," Mara said gently. "Have you ever considered the fact that Anakin looks up to you and is trying to prove himself to you?"
"Looks up to me?" Jacen said faintly, watching his brother's retreating figure. "I don't quite get that impression."
"Humor me."
"So what should I do?" Jacen's frustration was clear in his voice.
"Wait a bit, then go *talk* to him. No yelling. No arguing. Just talk," Mara answered. "I don't want either of you to come back until you've patched things up."
"You really want a miracle, don't you?"
"Do you really want me to use the 'do or do not' quote?" Mara said.
"Fine, fine!" Jacen groaned, rubbing his face with his hands, which promptly reminded him that he should shave the light beard he had

grown during his stay on Coruscant. "I'll do it. I'll go talk to him. But I can't promise anything."
"It's just a talk, not a battle for life and death."
"Says you."
[T] [T]
Several minutes later, Jacen found Anakin skipping rocks across the stream and into the waterfall. Only several meters tall, a small curtain of water cascaded down grey rock, throwing up a soothing mist.
"Jacen," Anakin said curtly, straightening.
"Anakin," Jacen stood next to Anakin and picked up a rock with the Force. With a half-hearted toss, he sent it skipping after Anakin's pebble.
"Here to lecture me again?" Anakin's feelings were closed off from his brother, but his annoyance at Jacen's presence seeped through.
"No lectures, just here to talk."
"So talk," Anakin mimicked Jacen's use of the Force, raising a larger rock which he then hurled across the surface of the stream.
Jacen let out a breath, listening to the fall of the water in the background. "I'm jealous of you, Anakin."
"What?" Anakin's next rock sunk immediately, splashing the both of them with a large amount of water.
"I'm jealous," Jacen said with a bitter smile. "You can act without thinking, without questioning yourself or the potential results. You know what you can accomplish and are not afraid of doing what it takes to achieve your goals."
"According to you and Master Horn, those aren't necessarily good traits." Anakin shrugged off his shirt, which was uncomfortably wet in the humid atmosphere of Borleias.
"But you are always so sure of yourself, no doubts at all," Jacen pointed out. "It's like you know your place in this galaxy already. Know what's in store for you. Yet, you happily go out and fill that role. You're my little brother, Anakin, and already you've done so much more than me. I don't even know where in this galaxy I'm supposed to fit in."
Anakin cast a sidelong glance at his older brother. "Is that what you really think? Do you really think I have a single clue as to what I'm doing? Half the time I'm winging it. You're right about me being reckless, about me taking risks, but I only do it because no one else can. You saw what happened at Fondor. I could have fired the weapon. Saved lives. But when someone else stepped into my place, well, that didn't go so well, did it? A lot of the time our friends, family, and a whole bunch of others look to me for an answer. What am I supposed

to do, tell them 'I'm sorry, I can't think of anything, go ask someone else?'"
"You're not all powerful," Jacen quipped, nodding. "Tell them exactly that. You don't have to add pressure on yourself by bending to their expectations."
"And then what? I know that if I spend time thinking about it, I can come up with an answer. What if I shoo them along and the guy they go to gets them all killed? I would have to live with the knowledge that I could have saved them but chose not to put the effort into doing so. As it is, I have to live with the fact that my decision to go to Myrkr got half of an entire generation of Jedi killed off. And you're *jealous* of me?"
"But that's the point," Jacen said. "You willingly place that burden on your shoulders, and are not afraid to do so. If our situations were reversed, if the New Republic was looking to *me* to end this war, I'm not sure I would be able to do it. I have so many questions about the Force, some of which Vergere is helping me to understand, but you don't seem to have any. To you, the Force comes almost instinctively. You use it as a tool, yet it helps you. You advocate for an active stance in this war, yet you're not afraid of the dark side."
"You can be aware of something and not fear it," Anakin said, unclipping his lightsaber. "Just like, at first, I was wary of the vongsense. Is it a dark power? Will it lead me astray? But then, the moment I start thinking about it, I remember that I control the Force, it doesn't control me. Now I know how that sounds, but don't you think intentions have as much to do with light or dark than anything?"
"Alright then," Jacen said with a small smile. "Tell me this, Anakin. If one goes to the dark side, say to protect someone or some people they care for, can they still care for that person if embracing the dark side means embracing the hate and passion that go with it?"
"If one is a Jedi, can they go to war, cause the deaths of many, if it means abandoning peace and giving into the emotions of fear and desires to protect?" Anakin countered. "The two aren't mutually exclusive. Just like Jedi can use lightning when they are scared and want to protect, a dark Jedi can still care about others, but in their own way."
"You really believe that?"
"Do *you* think vongsense is a dark-side trait?" Anakin held up his lightsaber.
Jacen touched the scar on his chest where the slave-seed was embedded. "I guess it would depend on how we use it."
"Exactly. I believe that, just like my lightsaber, the Force is a tool we can use to better or worsen our lives. If we let our fears control

ourselves, restrict ourselves, then we can only use the Force in a limited way. Master Tionne always said that the Jedi of old believed that the Force bound everything together. If that's so, then everyone, everything has both light and dark in them. If the Force is everywhere, both light and dark, then there really is no such thing as light side or dark side, there is only the Force. It's how it is used that is light or dark."
Jacen raised a dubious eyebrow. "Vergere says something similar."
"Really?"
"Yeah. She also doesn't believe in light or dark, but a unified Force."
"Do you mind if I have a talk with her?"
"Why do you need my permission?"
"Well, I got the impression you were her apprentice."
Jacen digested that comment for a moment. "I guess you're right. I mean, she is teaching me to let go of everything else I've learned so I can expand my potential."
"Sounds like one of the more mystical Jedi Masters," Anakin said with a faint smile.
Jacen grinned weakly as well. They both recognized that they were once again back to the status quo; one wouldn't say anything about his views if the other didn't. "Yeah, she definitely has that riddle-speaking, question-dodging skill mastered."
"Oh joy."
[T] [T]
Tahiri barked out another command in Yuuzhan Vong, and the seven Shamed Ones before her thrust their amphistaffs forward. Another command had them withdraw the deadly weapons. Off to the side, other Shamed Ones, those who were still dubious of the claims made by the Jedi, stayed behind a makeshift fence, watching silently. Tahiri strode to one of her students and repeated the command. The Shamed One, a former member of the Intendant caste until his arm began rejecting the implants, thrust the amphistaff forward once more. Tahiri corrected his grip and posture, then returned to the front of the class where both Danni Quee and Jaina were. Tahiri let out another command, and the seven Shamed Ones relaxed for the allotted break time.
Since merging her two selves, her Yuuzhan Vong memories were a lot clearer to her. Sometimes even more so than her human ones. Though they were now both *her* memories, recalling her human memories was like trying to recall something from a long time ago. Surprising even herself at times, she sometimes forget the Basic equivalent to the Yuuzhan Vong word she was thinking of. She was certain that the

person known as Riina had been overridden by the more dominant old Tahiri. But she was equally certain that much of Riina's character had survived to live on in her current self.
She was still getting used to the strange looks or stares when she did something that she supposed the older Tahiri wouldn't have. The current-Tahiri was aware of the changes on some level, but couldn't really help it. This was who she was now. Her DNA might be human, but she was part Yuuzhan Vong as well. One didn't exactly get over the merging of two personalities just like that. Especially during a time of war, when there was nothing but stressful, life-and-death situations on a daily basis. But during the rare moments of peace and quiet, when she had time to think to herself, she knew that she was much more different than before. And not necessarily in a good way.
Anakin had told her he had accepted all of her. But since the joining of her selves, even he had started looking at her as if seeing her in a new light. When they had been aboard the *Ksstarr—Trickster,* Tahiri reminded herself—Anakin had commented off-handedly about how different she had become. At first, Tahiri had thought nothing of it. Of course she was different, she was no longer the old Tahiri, but someone new. But then, when he held her gaze with a serious expression, she understood the deeper meaning in his subtle warning. Her merger had occurred the way it did mostly because of her feelings for Anakin and because of her ties to the Jedi. Anakin's warning had shaken her. She couldn't let herself destroy everything the old Tahiri valued.
Since then, she had tried to evaluate her actions, making sure that they would be something the old Tahiri would accept. But Riina's personality had been as strong-willed as any Yuuzhan Vong's would be. The old Tahiri's values and feelings, and her will to protect them, had made that human girl desire Riina's strength, determination, and all the positive traits the Yuuzhan Vong had. She had used her Yuuzhan Vong personality to reinforce her own mind, to become one with Riina on many levels. But in doing so, she had also given up some of what made her, well…her.
Pain, both her current-self's and others', was something she had begun to find more and more trivial as she worked with Shamed Ones. It confused her current-self to no end, because the Jedi part of her screamed in protest at this. She shouldn't be having such a careless reaction to pain, or even enjoying it at any level. Yet, because she truly embraced the Yuuzhan Vong aspect of her, because she hadn't feared it, pain had become little more than an annoying distraction. Something that made her stronger. She fought the urge to add 'better'

to that thought, but didn't quite succeed. Since she had become less susceptable to pain, her efficiency in combat, her ability to protect those around her, had only risen. She was indeed better than the old Tahiri in this way. Or was she?
Tahiri absently reached up to the three scars on her forehead. Anakin's vision of her, scarred and dressed as a Yuuzhan Vong strayed into the forefront of her thoughts. The old Tahiri had promised him that she would never turn into that dark version of herself, and that was a promise her current-self was determined to keep. She would rather die than break that promise. No matter how Yuuzhan Vong she became. No matter what else happened. One of the driving forces that had allowed the old Tahiri and Riina to merge, was their feelings for Anakin. Feelings that had only been reinforced by the joining of the two. A merging of Yuuzhan Vong loyalty and admiration of his strength and of a young teen's love for her best friend. It was those feelings that anchored her current-self to the light. To the Jedi. And most importantly, to Anakin. No matter if she was a Veila or Kwaad. In the end, she was still Tahiri and not Riina.
"They're not that bad," Jaina said, shaking Tahiri from her thoughts. "We still got some ways to go before they can fight warriors. Thanks again, Danni, for convincing General Antilles and the others to let us have the amphistaffs," Tahiri, breathing heavily, accepted a canteen from the aforementioned Jedi scientist.
"No problem, I kind of felt bad letting them starve to death. I mean, they're weapons, but they're also living creatures."
Tahiri exchanged the canteen for a towel and wiped at her forehead. Clad only in a sweat-soaked tank-top and loose pair of pants, Tahiri glared at the sun. "I hate this heat. At least on Tatooine it was a dry heat."
"Hopefully it'll be worse for the Yuuzhan Vong hiding out in the jungle," Danni replied, accepting the towel.
"So, what did you want me here for, Tahiri?" Jaina asked, after Tahiri's breathing evened out.
"Oh, right. How would you feel about a sparring session?"
Jaina cocked her head to the side. "Are you sure you just didn't bring me out here to share in your suffering? I don't enjoy this weather any more than you do."
Tahiri smiled briefly, her green eyes holding none of its usual warmth, and readjusted the band holding her wavy blonde hair back. "I want to teach the Shamed Ones how to fight, but not just like a Yuuzhan Vong. I want to teach them to think and fight like Jedi as well. The enemies they'll be facing have far more years of training and will be in better

physical condition than they are. Having alternative and unorthodox fighting techniques will give them a better chance. You can be the Jedi, and I'll use my knowledge of Yuuzhan Vong fighting techniques to mimic the assault of a Yuuzhan Vong warrior."
Jaina shrugged off the vest she was wearing, which Danni, acting as a servant to the goddesses Yun-Harla and Yun-Shuno, took. "Sure. How serious do you want it to be?"
"I'll do my best to stop the amphistaff from hitting you before it breaks the skin," Tahiri said. "It's had its venom sac removed so we don't have to worry about that."
"And here I thought you were here to convert me to the Vong religion, where pain and suffering is good."
"Yuuzhan Vong," Tahiri picked up an amphistaff lying on the table beside them. "And Yuuzhan Vong don't proselytize. If you're not Yuuzhan Vong, you're outside their belief system."
"It's strange how the *Yuuzhan* Vong and the Jedi are alike in an ironic way," Danni said. "The Jedi can't believe the Yuuzhan Vong exist just as much as they can't believe the Jedi exist."
"All the better to start educating both sides of the war," Tahiri said softly, before shaking her head as if to clear it. Shooting a Jaina challenging grin "Come on, Yun-Harla, let's show our new friends what you can do."
The seven Shamed Ones, including Tahiri's loyal followers Shaeri and Taan, eagerly seated themselves along the benches resting at the side of the biotics building as Tahiri and Jaina squared off. Anakin's own follower, Kadat, was busy helping the other scientist catalogue items recovered from the shaper compound.
Jaina activated her lightsaber, and its distinctive snap-hiss and purple glow caught the attention of nearby crews working on a variety of ships.
Tahiri twirled the amphistaff until it was wrapped around her wrist, just a knife-length's worth of the Yuuzhan Vong weapon sticking out.
Jaina and Tahiri circled each other, both waiting for the other to make the first move. With a hiss, Jaina faked a forward lunge, and Tahiri's amphistaff whipped through the air with an air-displacing snap. Jaina jerked to the side and tried to get closer to the smaller teen, but Tahiri quickly back-pedaled out of the way. Uncoiling the amphistaff from its whip mode, Tahiri then began to whirl her staff weapon threateningly, approaching Jaina as she did.
Jaina concentrated on the spin of the weapon. Timing each rotation, brown, analytical eyes met Tahiri's hardened green. Jaina lanced her lightsaber forward, breaking the momentum of the amphistaff. Tahiri

brought down one side of the weapon in an attempt to hit Jaina's hand, but the other Jedi was ready and deflected the blow. Tahiri ducked under another attack, then bobbed out of the way before Jaina could counter. Jaina's lightsaber flared as she and Tahiri exchanged another flurry of attacks. Before any pattern could be established, though, Tahiri once again darted back out of range.
Appearing frustrated, Jaina rapidly narrowed the distance between the two of them.
Tahiri sent the tip of her amphistaff whipping out.
Jaina felt a few strands of her hair fall as the spiked end just missed her cheek. At the same time, however, Jaina continued her forward progress, knocked Tahiri's weapon-hand aside, and backhanded Tahiri.
Or, she would have had her hand connected. The moment Tahiri's weapon-hand was knocked away, Tahiri ducked and sent a sweeping leg outward that took Jaina off her feet.
Tahiri whirled to her feet, using her momentum to swing her hardened amphistaff at Jaina, only to pause at the purple beam glowing beneath her raised arms, the tip centimeters from her throat.
"You're dead," Jaina remarked.
"You let me kick your legs out from under you."
"You were moving too fast for me to take you otherwise." Jaina rose to her feet. "Had to make you do something predictable."
"Using my own strengths against me," Tahiri inclined her head in understanding, then looked back to the wide-eyed Shamed Ones and gave them a brief explanation of what happened.
"Tahiri," Taan spoke up.
"Yes?"
"Can you and I…the word is 'spar', yes?"
Tahiri blinked, then nodded. "Sure."
Taan moved forward, but a small protest in Yuuzhan Vong from Shaeri caused her to stop. Tahiri, who clearly understood the younger Yuuzhan Vong, blushed.
"Tahiri?" Jaina chuckled.
"Shaeri wants to take my place. She said that she's supposed to be my protector and no one but another god can raise their weapons against me." Tahiri motioned for Shaeri to stand, and the Shamed One did.
"Taan, will you accept her in my place?"
"I will."
"You know what," Jaina said, motioning to the other Shamed Ones. "Maybe we should have them all do a little sparring. They know the basics and a few advanced techniques. Maybe we can even

incorporate some Jedi moves into their routines as well. Let's see what they can do and go from there."
"Good idea," Tahiri agreed. "It would be easier if Jacen and Anakin were here to help supervise, but I think we can manage it."
"Sooner or later, we'll have these seven be the most feared Shamed Ones the Yuuzhan Vong have ever seen," Jaina said lightly.
"Don't you think we should stop calling them 'Shamed Ones' then?" Danni finally spoke. "They have done nothing to be ashamed of, after all. It would also help undermine the Yuuzhan Vong's social hierarchy, not to mention help with their morale."
"Freed Ones," Taan said in her slow, accented Basic. "We are Freed Ones. No longer are we servants of the Supreme Overlord. We serve the *Jeedai* because we choose to, and thus we are free."
"It's catchy," Jaina remarked.
Tahiri smiled gently. "Freed Ones it is, Taan."
"Yes," Taan matched Tahiri's expression. "And it is thanks to the *Jeedai* that we will remain free."
[T] [T]
Anakin tossed and turned in his bed, shadows and phantoms haunting his dreams. Images of those who died on Myrkr, accusing eyes, harsh words. He hadn't been strong enough to save them, to protect them. If only he had more strength. He needed to do better.
Then, Tahiri's appeared, scarred and angry and covered in blood-coated Yuuzhan Vong armor. She was yelling at him in another tongue. Blaming him for failing. For breaking a promise. The three scars she had received on Yavin IV were more vivid than ever, but they were nearly lost in the network of scars that created a lattice work across her forehead. He couldn't hear or understand what she was saying, but had a sense that whatever was wrong was his fault. Again.
The scene faded out, and a figure that resembled Jacen came into view. His older brother was presiding over the bodies of the Jedi who had fallen on Myrkr. Over Chewie's body whom Anakin had been forced to leave behind. Then there were others who had not yet passed on. Jaina was among the dead. As was Tahiri and his aunt, Mara. Others still were disfigured or crippled, a silent crowd behind a faceless-figure that could still be recognized as Jacen. Anakin watched this all from a vantage point high above.
A slightly different message echoed, but no less accusatory. They were dead because of him. Because death was what he was good at. And while they lay cold and rotting, his position in the galaxy continues to grow. Was he happy now? Was it all worth it?

Anakin gasped. He opened his eyes, he was in a dark bog, a low layer of fog up to his knees. Trees, gnarly and sinister reached out from all directions. He was pretty sure that he had gone to sleep in his bunk on Borleias. A dream? He took a step forward, the swamp water slushing as he did.

"A vision," Anakin said to himself, his pulse still pounding violently.

He recognized where he was, Dagobah. The planet he and Tahiri had gone to when he had been fearful of his future, fearful that he would follow in the footsteps of his namesake. He stumbled through the swampy lands, seeking out the cave that had given him the answer he needed.

Accusatory whispers, seductive murmurs, like the wind, continued to brush through his mind. Anakin stopped at the cave, unhooking his lightsaber. He wouldn't need it. Visions don't kill you.

Well, not usually.

Ducking under the overhanging root, Anakin entered the cave, and immediately the whispers were silenced. He saw nothing but darkness, felt only the cold dampness that surrounded him.

He ventured further into the cave. Then it hit him. A chill that started at the base of his spine and shot upwards. The touch of something old. Of something evil. The contact caused Anakin's head to spin, his stomach to clench. It beckoned him forward. Taunting, filling him with guilt, with anger.

Anakin knew that he needed to get to the source. Was he feeling the residual effects of his brush with the Emperor? Or was it something more?

Anakin saw the exit of the cave, a vast field of white. His eyes adjusted, and he was on an empty world. No, not empty, a graveyard. Spirits of regret, of rage and hatred, soaring rock tombs carved into cliff faces. It was a deserted world, a desert world. At his feet, a skeleton, worn away by the shifting sands.

The darkness was all around him, making him dizzy, forcing him to his knees.

So, you are the next Lord of the Sith.

An echoing voice rattled Anakin's brain in his skull.

You have much potential indeed. I look forward to seeing your rise. And your fall.

Images, faster than his mind could process, flashed in front of his eyes. A distant asteroid. Death. Cold. Bloodied hands. Pain. Chaos. His mind burned with every vivid visual. His heart raced with every crushing sensation.

Finally, he was surrounded by ghostly looking figures, their misery clawing at his skin. Their faceless gazes piercing into his very soul.
"No!" Anakin yelled, crouching and covering his head as they reached for him. "No!"
A creature made of pure, dark rage consumed him, and the world spun. He spasmed, twisting in agony. Anakin closed his eyes, crying out as he did.
"Anakin!" A voice yelled. "Anakin, come on, snap out of it!"
Someone was shaking his shoulder. Panting, Anakin's eyes snapped open. He was back in his bunk on Borleias. Jaina, Tahiri, Jacen, Mara, Luke, and several others were all gathered in the room, expressions of concern on their faces. Mara was gripping him firmly with a look of grim determination.
"Anakin?" Tahiri said timidly. He could feel her reach out through the Force to comfort him.
"That was a vision," Anakin said, letting his head fall back onto his pillow.
"It looked like a bad one," Mara said, adding a wave of soothing energy to her words. "Are you okay?"
The words that came from the darkness repeated themselves in Anakin's mind. "No."
"What did you see?" Jacen asked.
Anakin closed his eyes, unable to face him. "A future. One none of us will enjoy."
[T] [T]
Borleias Occupation, Day 5
As Wedge left the meeting, he decided that there was something depressing about watching space-stations crash down on what had been the galaxy's capital. Knowing that there were millions, or even billions dying with every collision, people who had been unfortunate enough to not make it off the planet before it was conquered, was a sobering thought. He briefly felt a flash of rage. Why had beings like Pwoe and his flunkies managed to escape, when those countless others hadn't? Wedge had been on hand, heard various senators over the comm-system re-appropriate military craft for their own personal escort. Heard the cries of desperate transport operators pleading with the senators to return the protection they needed. It had been mayhem, an everyone-for-themselves type of moment. The worst and the best of people were brought out, and Wedge, for once, briefly wondered if the New Republic was really worth saving.
"General, sir." Wedge shook himself and glanced at a lieutenant at his side.

"Sorry, go ahead, Lieutenant."
"A refugee convoy has just arrived in need of repairs and provisions. We currently have no open berths available so we have them in a holding pattern by the *Mon Mothma*."
Knowing that there were people to handle this sort of issue, Wedge waited for whatever else it was the officer had come to tell him.
"A ship identifying itself as the *Raven's Claw*, still wishes to land. The pilot claims that there are two Jedi Masters onboard with orders from New Republic Intelligence."
"Inform Master Skywalker about their arrival, although he probably already knows. Is there any ship we can clear to make room for the *Raven's Claw*?"
"The ships from the last two convoys are still taking up the majority of the landing sites, sir." The officer said with a negative shake of his head.
"Get the one that is most space-worthy into the hangar deck of the *Mon Mothma* to finish its repairs there."
"Yes, sir." The officer didn't leave.
"Is there anything else, Lieutenant?"
"In addition to the refugee convoy, more reinforcements from the Advisory Council have arrived."
"The *Lusankya?*"
"Not yet, sir, it last reported to be en route. It should arrive in another two or three days. But, sir…"
"Go ahead."
"Among the reinforcements is a ship carrying several HoloNet news reporters. It too is requesting to land."
"So that's what Wolam meant when he said he wouldn't be the only guy carrying a holocam around," Wedge sighed, referring to the historian who had joined their ranks earlier in the day and had given them the informative briefing about the current state of Coruscant. "At least the Solos were nice enough to warn me about their arrival. Keep the vessel in a holding pattern with the rest. When *all* the ships from the previous convoy are repaired, then give it permission to land. Their priority is marked low, understood?"
"Yes, sir."
"Good. Inform XO Celchu about the arrival of the reinforcements, and he'll coordinate their integration into our forces."
Wedge sighed as the officer went off to follow orders. The galaxy as they knew it was in threatened, yet reporters still somehow managed to survive. Reporters and politicians, two more things he had to deal with now as a general that he didn't have to worry about as a simple

leader of an X-wing squadron. The arrival of two additional Jedi was not unwelcomed, he needed all the help he could get.
But at the same time, the fact that New Republic Intel was involved was also not good. Plans within plans drove Wedge crazy. How was he supposed to conduct a war if even his own government wanted him to fail?
"Cred-chit for your thoughts?" Tycho said lightly, entering the room.
Wedge let out a sarcastic breath. "All those years ago, fighting for the Rebel Alliance. Did you ever see yourself in this position?"
"Marooned on a jungle planet with relentless waves of enemies ready to greet us?"
"Old, and still fighting. Only another war." Wedge looked at his longtime friend and wing-mate, shocking Tycho by how old he looked. "I'm tired, Tycho. We should be enjoying our retirement, not wondering if we'll survive another day. You should be with Winter, starting a family of your own. And I should be with Iella," Wedge's voice hitched. "Watching our children play, grow up, get married. No matter how long we fight, how many battles we win, there's always another one around the corner."
"No news of her?" Tycho asked gently.
Wedge shook his head, shoulders slumping. "None. Sometimes, sometimes I wonder if I'm being foolish, holding out hope that she and the girls made it out. So many others didn't. And then I think, if she didn't make it out, why the heck should I care about continuing this fight. There really is nothing for me after this war. The politicians sure don't care about the New Republic anymore. Tell me Tycho, even if we do win this war, what's next? We go into retirement again for a couple of years, then get pulled into the next galactic war?"
Tycho placed a hand on Wedge's shoulders. "Maybe there is nothing for us old-timers after this war. Maybe we'll be fighting our entire lives, fighting for a peace that we can only dream of. We've been fighting for so long, I'm not sure we'll be able to do anything else. Can you really see us spending our days on Tatooine counting the grains of sand?"
Wedge smiled sadly. "That'd be nice though. Not having to worry about logistics, if we've just sent countless kids to their deaths. No politicians, no reporters, just your family and a vast expanse of nothing all around."
"Think about how many of those kids we're letting live that very boring life because we're fighting in their place," Tycho said. "And maybe someday, Winter and I can adopt a kid or two. Someday, you'll get to see your family again, watch them grow to be mini-Iellas. Have your

first heart attack when Myri and Syal start clubbing in some of those barely-clothes that seem to be all the fashion at the moment."
"My heart is grateful that neither of them have even reached ten yet," Wedge said dryly. In the background, one of the transport ships on the ground began to takeoff, a cloud of dust spraying up as its thrusters flared.
"Come on, let's see what Intel has in store for us this time," Tycho motioned. "I'll tell you all about the nice presents the Advisory Council decided to give us this time."
"Should I be scared that you said that so sarcastically?" Wedge said with a sidelong glance as they began to walk.
"You're General Wedge Antilles, you're never scared," Tycho replied deadpanned.
"How bad is it?"
"Three squadrons of volunteer pilots, all of them seem to be from places like Adumar. Two light cruisers with captains who have a flare for insubordination."
"They're still captains?"
"I didn't say they were," Tycho pulled out a datapad. "They're just captaining the two light cruisers. Both are lieutenants."
"You're making me depressed again, Tycho."
"Oh, don't worry, the three Star Destroyers the Council sent with the rest, all have captains. Real captains."
"So what's wrong with their ships?" Wedge guessed, feeling even more depressed than before.
"The three Star Destroyers are also fresh out of various conflicts across the front line. The *Tyrant's Grin* is almost out of munitions and its bridge deflector shields are gone. The *Ghost of Endor* still has about twelve decks on fire, with radiation leaks on eight of them."
Wedge held up a hand. "I get the idea. Will we have to scrap any of them to fix the others?"
Tycho nodded. "Most likely."
"The Advisory Council really do want to kill us, don't they?"
"It looks that way, Wedge. It definitely does."
"Then let's hope those new Jedi brought good news. I don't think we can take any more of the bad kind."
[T] [T]
They were an odd group to anyone watching them from afar. Walking through the thick jungle of Borleias was a group of three people in loose-fitting jumpsuits and wielding lightsabers. Seven people in New Republic security uniforms, armed with blasters were close behind. While four more individuals, wielding amphistaffs, brought up the rear.

"I'm surprised you decided to join us, Alema," Tahiri said wryly. "I thought you hated Yuuzhan Vong."
"I do," the Twi'lek said brightly. "We're hunting Vong now, aren't we?"
"I think she's commenting on your willingness to work with Shamed Ones," Corran said.
"Freed Ones, Master Horn," Tahiri interjected. "They aren't Shamed Ones anymore."
"Right, I stand corrected."
"Those scarless guys aren't really Vong," Alema shrugged. "As long as I don't have to hold hands or make friends with them, I'm good."
The group passed a concealed rectangle box. Corran motioned for everyone to stop, and he bent down and opened the box. Fishing through his armored jumpsuit, he pulled out a datapad and connected it into a slot on the rectangle box. Reviewing the results, he nodded.
"Okay, silence from here on out. Like earlier, the motion sensors report Vong movement every four hours, on the hour. Next Vong patrol will happen shortly. We'll take cover, wait for them, then take them out. Questions? No? Good. Get to cover."
Though there had been a debate as to whether they should let this group of Vong continue their observations, Wedge and the rest of the 'Insiders'decided that action had to be taken. What had tipped the scale was when two of the Yuuzhan Vong tried to capture one of the mechanics working on a refugee vessel. The Yuuzhan Vong had escaped without their captive, but the action showed that the survivors of the Yuuzhan Vong base were getting a bit too bold for comfort.
Learning of the impending attack, Tahiri immediately volunteered the services of several of the newly dubbed, Freed Ones. Mara and Luke's support of the idea made their participation a sure thing. Jaina, of course, wanted to help out, but was prevented from doing so. Both because a goddess of her status would not be tromping through forests, and because it would be bad should anything happen to her when engaging this unknown group of enemies. Alema, of course, quickly stepped in to fill Jaina's place, and Corran was selected due to his experience as a CorSec officer.
Minutes ticked by. Soon, the group heard the slow shifting of foliage as their prey neared. Several heavily scarred, tall warriors crept towards the New Republic base. More followed, until there were at least twenty in the group.
More than what the New Republic group had anticipated.
There was some additional shifting, this time a little ways off to the side. A second group of Yuuzhan Vong emerged from the shadows.

Then a third group. There were now a little over forty Yuuzhan Vong pushing their way through the jungle.
The Yuuzhan Vong were no longer scouting but on the verge of launching an attack of their own.
Corran, from his position in a snake-like tree above the large Yuuzhan Vong position, watched the group pass with narrowed eyes. He tried to figure out why the Yuuzhan Vong would attack now out of all times. Though a good sized force, the Yuuzhan Vong had no air support, and the cleared region around the biotics building would mean they would have no cover either. Was their goal to steal a ship? To sabotage something important?
Using the Force to trap any air around him, preventing others from hearing him speak, he slowly brought his comlink to his mouth. "Team Two, Twin Suns leader, go."
Based just outside the jungle, a second force of New Republic soldiers, as well as the remainder of the Freed Ones, Zekk, Ganner, and Luke, readied themselves. Additionally, two X-wings, piloted by Zindra Daine and a stubborn Jaina Solo, powered up and took off, ready to bombard an entire area if need be.
However, the moment both fighters took off, the Yuuzhan Vong force began to melt back into the forest. While a ground force retreating at the sight of aerial reinforcements would not have been strange, the fact that the two fighters had taken off far out of sight from the approaching force, meant that someone else was acting as a look-out.
Suddenly, whether by bad luck or not, the branch Corran had been using to brace himself, snapped. The Yuuzhan Vong all turned to look upwards.
"*Jeedai!*" An alarmed cry rang out. A sharp-eyed warrior had spotted Corran's lightsaber.
Corran quickly launched himself out of the canopy as several razor bugs shredded the tree tops. The rest of the New Republic ambush force joined the fray. Blaster fire poured down from the tree top as the New Republic soldiers provided cover fire. The four Freed Ones, wearing reflective armbands so they could be recognized as friendly, waded into the battle behind flashing blades of silver and blue.
The warriors, surprisingly enough, weren't sticking around to fight. While a dedicated force of twelve or so warriors held out against the ambush, the rest were retreating back into the forest. The twelve, however, proved to be more than enough to hold out against the New Republic force. Several explosive, blast bugs were launched into the canopy, ending the laser fire from above. A warrior, a good meter taller

than Corran, engaged the Jedi Master, while two more warriors occupied Alema and Tahiri.
"I've missed this," Alema said, dodging under a whirling amphistaff, then blocking a swinging attack from her opponent.
"You've missed being attacked by Yuuzhan Vong?" Tahiri panted, her opponent was easily twice her petite size and probably weighed thrice as much. Each blow she blocked shook her entire body jarringly.
"No," Alema dodged another attack and then grazed the cheek of her assailant. "The adrenaline rush that comes with killing them!"
"I'll take your word for it," Tahiri replied, yelping when the next blow caused her to stagger.
Alema allowed the side of the warrior's amphistaff to scrape her side. In exchange, she thrust her silver blade into the warrior's armpit, skewering and roasting internal organs. The warrior let out a hate filled rasp and then dropped to the ground.
At the same time, Tahiri spun around, caused her own warrior to overcompensate on a forward thrust, and she jammed her lightsaber into his chin.
By then, several of the still living but stunned New Republic soldiers, recovered and began to renew their blaster fire.
X-wings roared above, lasers slicing through the jungle canopy and incinerating retreating Yuuzhan Vong.
Tahiri's eyes darted around the battlefield. She felt some amount of pride at the sight of a warrior skewered by both Shaeri's and Taan's amphistaffs. Though the Freed Ones were battered and bloody, their victory was very much evident on their faces. The other two Freed Ones, former warriors, had likewise taken out their opponents. They seemed to have an air of grim satisfaction as they sat on a fallen log above the bodies of the warriors they had vanquished.
The entire conflict was over almost as soon as it began.
"That was weird," Alema said, tearing open a bacta patch and placing it on the gash on her side.
"Was it just me, or did it look like they knew we were waiting for them?" Tahiri nodded.
"It's no coincidence that they decided to pull back the moment we launched the X-wings," Corran agreed. "They also tripled their number the day we decide to lay in wait for them."
"A spy?" Alema raised an eyebrow and glanced towards the Freed Ones.
Tahiri stepped between Alema and the Twi'lek's targets. "Possibly. None of the Freed Ones are responsible, though."
"We don't know that," Corran shook his head.

"Master Horn!" Tahiri protested. "It could just as easily be someone from those refugee convoys, or from the reinforcements that arrived. If the Freed Ones were traitors…"
Corran held out his hands. "I am only saying that we cannot discount the possibility until we have fully investigated it. It could very well be one of the new arrivals, but until we know for sure, we can't let our guard down."
Tahiri glared mutinously, but didn't disagree.
"For now, let's return to base and find out if anything happened on their end. If the spy isn't one of the Freed Ones, then we have to find out who it is, and fast."
[T] [T]
Borleias Occupation, Day 6, Predawn
There was a rap at the door. Anakin ignored it. Ever since the vision he had received, a vision that had completely shaken him, he hadn't exactly been in the mood to talk with anyone. Instead, he busied himself with spare droid parts and items Kadat, his 'Freed One' follower, had given him from the Shaper compound. He hadn't slept since the vision either. Even now, he was staring at the ceiling, absently fiddling with a memory core.
There was another knock.
Anakin made no move to answer. He had triple locked the door and even welded a metal bar over the latch. The images from the vision still fresh in his mind. The images and the voice that had spoken to him.
Evil voices that acknowledge you as the next Lord of the Sith, were never good things. Despite believing that he would never turn to the dark side, Anakin couldn't help but feel a chill. The words were spoken with such certainty.
It made Anakin once again question his own beliefs. Doubt everything he had come to accept as true. If he believed that there was no light and dark side, would it be possible for him to become a Sith without even realizing it? What if, even if his actions were done with the best intentions, they were actually those of someone walking the path of the dark side?
Someone pounded on the door, and Anakin threw the data core he had been fiddling with at the wall. He let his anger and annoyance flash out to whoever was on the other side of the door. Couldn't they let him feel sorry for himself in peace?
To his surprise, a round, white-hot circle appeared in the center of the bar he had welded to the door. The circle grew in size, reducing the bar to molten slag.

It was unfair, Anakin though grumpily, that everyone he was friends with had to have a lightsaber. Maybe he should invent a Jedi-proof door.
An almost blinding, blue light filled his quarters now that the metal bar had been reduced to a slag heap on the ground. The blue blade retracted, and for several long seconds, all was quiet. Anakin reached out to see who was on the other side of the door. Now he was more afraid than ever to open the door. Another rule someone should create: angry girlfriends should not be allowed to hold lightsabers.
Despite there being a good sized hole in his door, the culprit decided to knock politely once more. With a groan of surrender, Anakin made a half-hearted gesture and the remnants of the door slid open.
"Good morning, Anakin," Tahiri plopped onto the edge of his bunk, like she hadn't just sliced away the lock on his door with her lightsaber.
"What are you doing here, Tahiri?" Anakin said tiredly.
"'Good morning to you too, Tahiri. Have you eaten yet?' No Anakin, I haven't. Maybe we can go down and get a bite to eat. 'This early?' Well, I would have slept but someone's thoughts were being awfully loud and I couldn't sleep a wink. 'Sorry, I thought I had those thoughts closed off.' You're obviously a slow learner, hero-boy. You can never shut me out completely. 'Sorry again.' Well, you should be. You helped me sort out my head, so now it's my turn to return the favor. 'Not now, Tahiri.' Oh fine, keep on trying to be macho. I'm sure it's healthy and everything, keeping it all in. I mean, look what happened to me. I turned out all right. 'Okay, fine, you win. If I do this, will you leave me alone?' Yup, what are best friends for?"
Anakin stared at Tahiri blankly. "What was that?"
"Just skipping ahead of our conversation so we can get to the point." Tahiri shrugged. "You *are* going to let me help, right?"
"Tahiri."
"Anakin." Tahiri matched his glare.
"Fine, you win!" Anakin groaned, he rolled away from her to face the wall. He didn't feel like fighting with her, not when he had bigger concerns on his mind.
"You don't have to make it sound like I'm torturing you or something. I'm just trying to help you the same way you've helped me for the past year."
Anakin winced at the hurt that came over their bond. "Sorry. I'm just…I don't know, worried? Scared?"
"What *was* in that vision?" Tahiri said, lying down next to him and resting her back against his. "I've never seen you spooked this bad."

"Tahiri, do you think I have it in me to become a Sith Lord?" Anakin asked in response.
Tahiri fell silent, a rare feat for her. Slowly though, she responded. "I think you could become whoever you choose to be, Sith or Jedi. Remember back on Dagobah. If you let your fears get the better of you, you saw what you feared. Is that what you saw in that vision? You going dark?"
Anakin shook his head slowly, what he wanted to say getting stuck in his throat. "No."
"Then what?"
"I think the dark Jedi are using this war to rebuild," Anakin said softly, he shifted and Tahiri let her head rest on his chest. "They see me as their next leader."
"Well, at least the Sith won't last long then," Tahiri began drawing random shapes on the palm of his hand. "If they expect you to become the next Sith Lord, they aren't exactly the smartest of Sith."
"Tahiri…"
"Hmm?"
"If I do go dark, what would you do?"
Tahiri nuzzled his chest, the warmth of his body already lulling her to some much needed sleep. "I'd follow you."
Anakin was jerked out of his stupor once he processed her words. "What?"
Tahiri looked up at him, soft green eyes hiding nothing. "If you go dark, I'll follow. Then maybe, just maybe, that vision you had of me as a scarred Vong, will actually come true. Maybe, I *will* be responsible for killing the last Jedi."
"But…but…Then I…" Anakin stammered.
"Dummy, don't go dark and you won't have to worry about that," Tahiri rolled her eyes and gave him a brief kiss. "I'll be with you no matter what path you take, light…or dark."
Anakin wanted to protest further, but Tahiri snuggled against the side of his body and was a sleep within seconds.
Feeling fatigue tug at his mind, as well as the peacefulness Tahiri was emitting as she slept, was enough to convince his weary body to give in. Anakin closed his eyes, temporarily banishing the haunting effects of the vision he had received.
Temporarily.
[T] [T]
Borleias Occupation, Day 6, Mid-Day
The scream that sounded out over the still landing area caught everyone off guard. All the mechanics and repair crews were still

taking their food break, so the usual clanking of their tools had been silent. All the more reason why the shrill cry startled everyone. Footsteps, heavy and fast ran towards the location.
"Over here!" The holocam operator for the historian Wolar Tser, Tam Elgrin, frantically waved to the group.
The group of mechanics and security personnel made their way to Tam, then looked in the direction he was pointing. The lead officer in charge took one look at the scene and grimaced.
"Someone get General Antilles and Master Skywalker. Inform them that there's been a murder." The officer held up his gun. "Also inform them that we have a suspect in custody."
Very slowly, the officer motioned to the other members of his team, and they surrounded a bewildered and stunned, but blood-covered, Shaeri. In her hand was a bloodied coufee, several wounds matching its blade decorating the chest of a pale-faced body in a New Republic uniform.
[T] [T]
"Corporal Addion was part of the New Republic Intel unit assigned to General Antilles' fleet," Corran murmured, reading off the decedent's profile. "He was popular among the rank-and-file for holding sabaac games and other forms of entertainment."
"I had him tracking down several leads that developed after yesterday's mission was leaked," Mara added.
Wedge meshed his fingers together. "So it's possible the person he was tracking discovered and killed him. Who did you have him follow?"
Mara hesitated. "I was having him watch the Freed Ones. Shaeri was one of the individuals I told him to keep an eye on. Despite her allegiance to Tahiri, Shaeri did come from the flagship of Yun-Harla's head priest."
"You said you had several leads that led you to suspect the Freed Ones?" Ielia, who had arrived earlier in the morning with both Syal and Myri thanks to the efforts of Wraith Squadron, asked.
"A transmitter and portable villip were found in the common area we had constructed for them," Mara nodded. "I also managed to trace a signal emitted the other day back to their living quarters."
"In your opinion, Mara," Wedge said calmly. "Do you think Shaeri's responsible?"
Mara exhaled slowly. "It does look really bad. She was found at the scene covered in blood, holding the knife that was used to kill the corporal, who had been investigating her. Tam Elgrin was the first on the scene right after the cry, and according to him, he didn't see anyone else in the area. Interviews with the other Freed Ones show

that she was missing from the mid-day meal and that the last time they remember seeing her was at this morning's lessons."
"She had the means and the opportunity," Ielia said. "But what I don't get is why she didn't run or attack Tam? There was a good five minutes between the cry and the others finding Tam and her in that maze of ships. Why stay behind?"
"Exactly," Mara said in agreement. "According to what Shaeri told her, Tahiri said that Shaeri had been training at the perimeter and had heard the cry as well. She had arrived only a few seconds before Tam did. Though the knife Shaeri was holding was her own, she said that had lost it during yesterday's skirmish in the jungle. Danni and the other scientists who catalogued the weapons from the dead, confirm that Shaeri had lost her weapon in the fight."
"On the flip side," Luke spoke up. "If Shaeri was training at the perimeter, she could have stashed her weapon there yesterday."
"So, Shaeri is either being framed, or she is the killer," Tycho clarified.
"We know that she might have had motive to kill Corporal Addion," Corran said. "But we should discuss who benefits from framing her."
"The real spy?" Mara arched an eyebrow. "If we focus on Shaeri, the spy has free reign."
"The Yuuzhan Vong will also benefit," Danni said, shrinking slightly when all eyes turned to her. "If they can stop any trust from forming between the New Republic and the Freed Ones, they will have effectively cut off a potential source for allies. It was the entire reason we agreed to train the Shamed Ones in the first place. We train them, turn them into Freed Ones, and we fight to overthrow the Supreme Overlord. But if the spy successfully kills this before it can start, then the Yuuzhan Vong won't have to worry about an uprising from within."
"I agree," Sharr Latt, a member of Wraith Squadron and an expert in Yuuzhan Vong psychology. "Additionally, if this spy sabotages the relationship now, the other Shamed Ones who haven't come over to our side will see it as a punishment from their gods. If Shaeri is fervent in her devotion to Yun-Shuno, then she would not have lied to Tahiri, whom she sees as the goddess' avatar."
"The main problem is that the damage has already been done," Face said calmly. "Corran said it earlier, that Corporal Addion was popular among the rank-and-file." Face looked to Wedge and Luke. "I can't believe that the decision to train the Shamed Ones was popular on all levels." Both nodded, and Face continued. "There is probably an inherent feeling of mistrust towards them, simply because they are Yuuzhan Vong. Add to the fact that most of this force saw Coruscant go up in flames, and they won't be too open to any sort of alliance. They

are looking for any excuse to take their frustrations out on these Shamed and Freed Ones, and just a suspicion will tip that balance for some."
"Face is right," Iella said grimly. "Whether Shaeri is guilty or not doesn't really matter at the moment. Even if we find out the murder was committed by someone else, this murder will open some very raw wounds. I have a feeling that the killer picked Corporal Addion on purpose, due to his popularity and his assignment."
"Then the question is: what can we do?" Wedge asked.
"We should ask Tahiri and Anakin to keep the Shamed and Freed Ones out of sight for now," Mara said. "The less interaction, the better."
"Also, unfortunately, we also have to confine Shaeri to the brig," Face said, then seeing the glares from Mara, Danni, and Leia, quickly added. "At least until we find out who is responsible."
Wedge sighed. "Very well. Can we do anything about the rift this will cause between our forces and the Freed Ones?"
"Not at the moment," Face shook his head. "If we find out that the culprit is not Shaeri, and is not any of the other Freed Ones, that should help. But it will take time, more than anything, for the rift to heal."
"Anakin and Tahiri have a good idea," Sharr said. "Just bad timing. This soon after Coruscant, when the Yuuzhan Vong currently have the upper hand, not many of our side is going to be happy. I would not be surprised if the culprit *is* someone on our side who just wants to break up the alliance."
[T] [T]
Borleias Occupation, Day 8
Jaina was in the privacy of her quarters, the one place where she could drop the 'Yun-Harla' act and just be herself. One benefit of the act was receiving Wedge Antilles' former quarters, or what had once been General Dericote's personal haven. Easily big enough to fit an entire snub-fighter inside, there was a large window with a view of the jungle, a solid wooden desk, and various other comforts that had survived the Yuuzhan Vong occupation—including a real bed. The sheets had been another issue, but because she was a goddess, new ones were quickly fabricated for her. Now if only she could actually *be* a goddess instead of a normal mortal, then she could solve the troubles that were currently driving her up the wall.
Reading over the various investigations from the past two days, she was practically a ball of frustration. The Insiders were no closer to finding the spy than they had been at the start of the investigation. Clumsily placed listening devices were popping up everywhere,

confusing Iella and the rest of the Intelligence officers to no end. The mechanics had also reported that several tools and spare parts had gone missing. The nature of the parts was worrying; some were very volatile in nature.
The door chime rang, and Jaina, sitting on her bunk, briefly used the Force to check who it was. Feeling a strict sense of duty over a fiercely loyal core, Jaina allowed a small smile to come to her face. "Come on in, Jag."
The door hissed open, and Jag, holding a covered plate, bowed lowly. "Goddess, might I have permission to enter your quarters?"
She rolled her eyes, then tilted her head back royally and gestured. "You may, lowly human."
Jag glanced up ever so slightly, quirking an eyebrow. "As you command."
Jaina couldn't help but feel a little better as Jag rose and entered the room, the door hissing close behind him. "What can I do for you, Jag?"
Jag replied by removing the cover of the plate to reveal a selection of still warm food. "You missed lunch. I was not sure what you preferred so I have brought a little bit of everything."
Jaina's stomach chose that moment to growl, causing the young Jedi to flush slightly. "Thanks, I guess I was hungrier than I thought."
"I live to serve," Jag remarked, taking the plastisteel chair by the desk.
Jaina picked up a wafer of bread and added several strips of all-purpose meat to it. "You wouldn't by any chance have brought something to drink?"
Jag's lips twitched, and he pulled out a canteen and tossed it to her. "A libation to the Goddess."
"Call me 'Goddess' one more time and I'll give you a divine boot up your butt," Jaina groaned between mouthfuls of food. "It was fun the first day, but really? Ever since that Sharr Latt arrived, I had no idea being a goddess could be so hard."
"The sacrifices we must all make," Jag said solemnly, humor twinkling in his eye. "It is rather difficult serving a goddess who is so demanding."
Jaina's eyes narrowed. "Demanding?"
"Quite. Just the other day, I saw you ordering those poor investigators to search the waste bins for evidence. I believe you said something along the lines of 'Unless you really want to see what happens when a goddess gets angry, scour every inch of this base for evidence. Just because Shaeri's a Vong doesn't mean you have to do a half-assed job.'"

"You saw that, huh?" Jaina said, looking away. The investigators in question had had the misfortune to encounter her right after she had bumped into Zekk. Though no words were exchanged, just seeing him again had brought back the kiss and feelings she had tried to keep buried. When Zekk had passed her without comment, the only ones around to take out her frustrations on were the investigators who had come to report to her.
"I also saw the glances you exchanged with the other Jedi earlier," Jag said tonelessly.
Jaina let out a harsh exhale. "Zekk and I used to be the best of friends. The war just complicated it all."
"So you still have feelings for him?" Jag asked in the same tone, but sounding un-accusing at the same time.
Jaina looked away. "I…I don't know what I feel for him. We're different people now, you know. Even before the war we weren't exactly a couple."
"Feelings do not just go away," Jag said. He then took a deep breath, as if he was trying to carefully choose his next words. "If he made you happy in the past, then it is possible he can do so now. I do not know what has gone on between the two of you, but it is clear that you still feel…something, for him. Do not use 'war' as an excuse to sever old ties."
"What?" Jaina jerked her head up in surprise, seeing only Jag's cool gaze. "Wait, what do you mean?"
"You would not be this conflicted if you did not have any feelings for him. The fact that you are, means that some part of you still feels for him in some way. If there is a chance that being together with your longtime friend will make you happy, then I wish for your success." Jag stood and made his way to the door.
"Wait!" Jaina repeated, hastily pushing the plate of food aside and moving to grip one of Jag's hands.
"I do not wish to complicate the situation. Find out just what he means to you. If you discover that the two of you have truly moved on, then I will be waiting. If not, well, then, I guess this will be a good bye of sorts, Jaina."
Jaina's hands fell limply to her side as Jagged exited the room. Her mind, heart, and stomach were now in turmoil. If she was so afraid of Zekk dying, then why was she perfectly happy to let herself feel something for Jag? Was it because he was a relative unknown? His dying would not hurt her as badly as Zekk's would, would it? Not for the first time, Jaina understood why the Jedi of old forbid relationships.

They were confusing as heck, and hurt just as much. Was it even worth it?
Jaina stared at the empty doorway, then let out a sigh and retreated to her bed. Plopping down and scattering all the reports in the process, Jaina reflected on Jag's words.
Great, now she had something else to preoccupy her mind with.
[T] [T]
"Thanks for coming, Anakin," Alema said, from her position seated on the ground.
"Alema," Anakin sat down on the cushion she had setup across from her. Noting the pulsating crystal she was hold, he glanced at her quizzically. "That's the lambent you picked up at Coruscant?"
Alema nodded. "But I've been having trouble with it. I was hoping you could give me some advice."
"Can I hold it?"
"Sure," Alema passed the living crystal over. "No matter what I do, it's like it's afraid of me or something."
Anakin closed his eyes, feeling the crystal respond to his tentative connection. His own lightsaber warmed at his side in a harmonic reaction. "That's because it is."
"What? Why would it be? It's just a Vong plant-crystal thing, isn't it?"
Anakin allowed a half-smile and took out his own lightsaber. "It's a living creature, just like you or me. I formed a Force-bond with it. It takes care of me, I take care of it."
"With a crystal?"
"It's not so different from when we have to create our first lightsabers," Anakin said, waving a hand. His lightsaber began to deconstruct itself, the pieces floating in the air. In the center of it all was his own lambent crystal, sparkling in the dim light of the room. "We have to use the Force to guide us, to pick and align the parts according to our own needs. The crystal is the heart of the lightsaber, something that chooses us just as much as we choose it. A lambent crystal is even more important as it has its own presence in the Force. You may not feel it at first, but ever since you picked it from its pod, it has formed a bond with you."
Alema watched Anakin's lightsaber fly back together. "Show me."
"Show you?"
"What it's like. To bond with something of *theirs*." Alema said the last word with contempt. "I want it to help me find and kill Vong. Is the reason it's not doing it because it is Vong too? What's it like, using its senses?"

"I thought you were able to sense Vong before? You did it back on Coruscant."
"I only knew they were around," Alema shook her head. "It's like knowing that there is oxygen in the air. I know it, but I can't see it. I knew that there were Vong around us back on Coruscant, but I couldn't tell you where they were or how many. I probably wouldn't even know it if they were right in front of me. And now that we're training Vong, surrounded by Vong, well, that particular ability just doesn't help like I thought it would."
Despite her tough demeanor, Anakin saw a shadow of fear in Alema's eyes. Rather than call her on it, however, he inclined his head and handed her crystal back to her. "Alright, link with me through the Force. Feel what I feel when I make contact with the lambent."
Alema's eyes fluttered close, her mind stretching outwards. She could feel Anakin's familiar presence a meter in front of her, a solid mass of power, just barely controlled. As always, it was intoxicating for her. To know that the one she followed was so strong, capable of so much. And now, now he was helping her avenge her sister, by helping her better herself. If she could sense the Vong through the Force… the thoughts turned her presence malevolent.
She knew that, had Anakin been one of the other Jedi Masters, or maybe even one of the others of their age, he would have chastised her about controlling her emotions, about the dangers of the dark side. Instead, she only found acceptance, albeit a wary one. It was as if Anakin understood that her anger was just a part of her, understood the reason behind her pain. The knowledge that he wasn't going to shun her evened out her presence and allowed her to strengthen the bond she formed with him.
Her feelings of loyalty towards Anakin caused her to sense Anakin's other bonds. Tendrils of emotion towards different people. One of the stronger bonds was his connection to Tahiri. Strangely enough, Alema felt both apprehension and caution layering that link. Curious, she tried to delve just a little bit further. An invisible force gently pushed her away. Remembering why she had formed the link to him in the first place, she refocused on Anakin's thoughts. Could feel him guide her towards one specific connection. Anakin was on one end, but the other was invisible to her, lost in a fog.
The gentle force returned, lightly urging her into the darkness. Fear swelled up. Could she really link with something Vong? All their living creatures brought nothing but pain and sorrow to the galaxy. The darkness grew thicker, and outside, beads of sweat began to pour

down her brow. She didn't like it. She didn't want to give a Vong access to her mind.
With a gasp, she tore herself from the connection and hurled the lambent away. "No! I won't do it!"
Gasping, a hand clutching her chest as if it had been burned, the blue-skinned Twi'lek tried to catch her breath, staring fearfully at the discarded crystal. Shaking her head slowly, she looked up at Anakin regretfully. "Sorry, I just can't work side-by-side with something created by the Vong."
"It's okay," Anakin said. "If you can't, then you can't."
Alema gathered the discarded crystal and let it slide back into the cloth pouch she had had it in. "Thanks for trying though."
When Anakin left, Alema's shoulders slumped. She had been hoping for an additional edge against the Vong, but she still couldn't conquer her fear of them.
"The young Solo's way is not the only way."
A voice caused Alema to jerk her attention back to the door. She hadn't sensed anyone approach. She didn't see anything but a shadowy silhouette on the wall. "Who's there?"
"Just harmless, little me," The voice of Vergere, the Fosh Force-user, replied in a light tone. *"I was observing you earlier. The young Solo uses an interesting technique. Instead of subjugating the crystal, he works alongside it."*
Alema's eyes narrowed. "What are you talking about?"
"Tell me, Jedi," Vergere said, ignoring Alema's question. *"How badly do you wish to feel the Yuuzhan Vong?"*
"I can't do what Anakin does," Alema shook her head.
"Then perhaps you can try the method his brother employs," Vergere's voice replied glibly.
"Doesn't Jacen see the Vong as well? What's different?"
"Everything. Nothing. Talk with Jacen Solo. I'm sure that he will be able to help you do what his younger brother could not."
[T] [T]
Borleias Occupation, Day 8, Evening
"Stand down!" Wedge called out, gazing about the devastated mess hall in disbelief. Tables were overturned, chairs were broken, and light fixtures were dangling every which way. At the center of the disaster were Tahiri and Danni, surrounded by several groaning enlisted men and women. The scene looked just like a bar brawl gone out of control. Tahiri and Danni glanced in Wedge's direction, relief clear on their faces.

"Can someone tell me just what happened here?" Wedge questioned sternly.
"There was a…disagreement as to who murdered Corporal Addion." Danni said hesitantly. "There were also questions as to the allegiance of myself and Tahiri."
Wedge glanced to one of the conscious combatants. "Is this true, soldier?"
"General, they are the…"
"Is it true?"
"Something along those lines," the soldier responded mulishly.
"General, sir," another soldier spoke up. "Private Jardaj and Mikra had just received news that their families hadn't made it off Coruscant before the Vong took over. They overheard the Jedi defending the Vong you have in custody and lost control. Things just got out of hand from there."
Wedge exhaled. "Very well. I want all those involved confined to quarters for the time being. Including the two Jedi."
"Sir?" Danni's eyes widened.
"Until we get to the bottom of Corporal Addion's murder, I can't afford to let this division spiral out of control. I'm sorry, Danni, Tahiri."
"Understood," Danni swallowed, while Tahiri just nodded in acceptance.
As the military police moved in to restore order and apprehend those involved, Wedge's shoulders slumped. On either side of him, both Tycho and Ielia offered consoling words.
"We'll get to the bottom of this soon, Wedge," Tycho said.
"My people are trying to trace several more signals we detected," Ielia added.
"Sir!" A harried officer sprinted into the mess-hall. "General Antilles, sir!"
"Bad news?" Wedge murmured as the officer nimbly stepped around the over turned tables.
"Or he needs to go to use the refresher really bad," Tycho replied, nodding regretfully.
"General Antilles," the lieutenant said. "Sir, there's been another murder."
"Who is it this time?"
"Sir, the two guards watching over the prisoner were found dead during the shift change. The prisoner is missing."
"The security cameras?" Wedge held out a hand and motioned for the military police to bring Tahiri and Danni over.
"They were disabled," the officer murmured.

"And how were the guards killed?" Iella asked.
"A Vong knife," the officer replied. "Both were attacked from behind and stabbed in the neck."
"So there was more than one attacker?"
"Only one knife was found at the scene, still lodged in the guard's neck."
Danni's eyebrows narrowed at the method. "What was the angle of the blade?"
"Ma'am?" The officer looked to Wedge.
"Answer the question."
"Upward," the officer said. "Why?"
"No Yuuzhan Vong warrior attacks from the back," Tahiri responded for Danni. "How tall were Shaeri's guards?"
"That's the puzzling thing," the officer muttered. "Both Corporal Shyja and Private Mirak were close to two meters tall. The prisoner was barely a meter and a half. Unless Vong have some jumping ability we haven't seen before, it would have been impossible for the prisoner to stab her guards the way she did."
Danni glanced over to Tahiri. "It matches the profile, don't you think?"
"Definitely," Tahiri nodded grimly. "General Antilles, you have Yuuzhan Vong infiltrators in the base. Most likely the Intendant caste or priests from Yun-Harla."
"How sure are you?" Wedge said sharply.
"Sure enough that if we don't do anything about it, we'll have more deaths very soon," Tahiri said. "The infiltrators most likely took Shaeri because they knew she was close to me. They will be trying to get her out of the base perimeter."
"That's good enough for me," Wedge said, he glanced to Tycho. "Lock the base down and have Lando set his droids up. The sooner we find the infiltrators, the…"
A rumbling explosion rocked the base and the lights in the room immediately went dark. Not only did the lights go out, but the environmental systems and anything without its own power supply went dead as well. Shortly after, Wedge's comlink crackled to life. *"Sir! The power generators we had hooked up were destroyed! Localized shield generators, long-range communication, base security, all down!"*
"Increase perimeter controls, no one is getting in or out," Wedge said. "Redouble…"
Tahiri's lightsaber flared to life and sparked as a projectile was vaporized in the beam. Three figures were moving in the shadows of the mess hall.

"General, get out of here!" Tahiri yelled as hisses of *'Jeedai'* were heard. "Their goal is probably to assassinate you. Danni, go with him."
"And you?"
"These guys aren't warriors, I'll be fine." Tahiri's blue blade hummed, illuminating the young Jedi in its deadly light.
As Wedge and Iella began to retreat, covered by Tycho and Danni, the officer who had reported to them tried to follow. Tahiri, however, hurled a table at him and pinned him to the wall. "You stay here."
When the officer snarled in Yuuzhan Vong, Tycho promptly trained his blaster on the officer and fired a shot directly between the officer's eyes. The ooglith masquer peeled off, revealing a dead Yuuzhan Vong. Tahiri absently noted the pendant being worn and shook her head.
"Yun-Harla infiltrators. Look out for more of them."
"How many more?" Tycho said firing at another one of the shadows in the room.
"If there are four here," Tahiri mentally fell back on the memories that had been implanted into her. "Expect two more groups of four at the very least."
"They probably came on one of the refugee transports," Tycho muttered, flinching when one of the shadows returned fire with a blaster of their own. Tahiri's blade, however, intercepted the beams. The remaining shadows melted back into the darkness.
"Their goal is General Antilles," Tahiri said tersely. "No reason to stick around and fight us."
Tycho nodded at the young blonde and holstered his blaster. "So, those three plus eight more?"
"Yeah," Tahiri nodded as they hurried to catch up to Wedge and the others. "They're the advance guard, just like Nom Anor and his men were when the Yuuzhan Vong were going to invade our galaxy."
"I don't like what you're implying." Tycho muttered, glaring at the corpse of the faux-officer.
"Sorry, but I would bet my life that a Yuuzhan Vong fleet is about to attack."
[T] Chapter End [T]
A/N: I had contemplated writing an Iella/Wedge reunion scene, but I liked the one in canon so saw no need to rewrite it. Tam Elgin gets a mention here, but I won't be focusing on him all that much. Again, that's a canon plot I'm more or less keeping off to the side (Tarc appears in my Rebel Stand with his own story in my Destiny's Way). So...our favorite characters are once again in trouble and Anakin has more worries than just the Vong. And I've finally managed to go an

entire chapter without a space battle...oh well, next chapter definitely makes up for it.
In other news...I'm working on chapter 33, the third chapter in my Force Heretic trilogy. I really enjoy it when the story writes itself. Its going places that surprise even me. My version of the trilogy is looking more like my Dark Journey in that I'm only vaguely staying to the storyline (namely the beginning and end of it). Expect whole new adventures and fun for the entire gang.
Oh, and having finished reading the Dark Nest Crisis trilogy, I guess I shouldn't have had such high expectations, but I couldn't have been more disappointed with the story if I tried. After reading it, I've decided to write my own version/continue my AU EU universe into those three books. I already have a bunch of plots bouncing around in my head. It'll be a story separate from A Destiny Altered tenatively titled 'A Fate Unseen'. Of course, I'm going to finish this story first, so the first chapter of my version of Dark Nest Crisis won't be up until the end of this year at the earliest.
As always, reviews are welcome.

ADA 13

Thirteen
[T] [T]
Borleias Occupation, Day 9
The fleet of Wyrpuuk Cha passed through the outer limits of the Pyria system without slowing. They knew what they were up against, the limited defenses their enemy had to offer. Ever since the loss of their high priest, those of Yun-Harla were desperate to redeem themselves in her eyes. They were all the more motivated since all three Solo children were at Borleias. Many infiltrators had gone ahead, hidden among the refugee ships, and had been sending continuous reports. The more Wyrpuuk Cha heard, the more furious he had become. To arm and train the Shamed Ones was a direct insult to the gods; perhaps even more so than the Jaina Solo *Jeedai* running around calling herself Yun-Harla. Shamed Ones using amphistaffs! Using items reserved for the shapers and warriors! It was unthinkable. What was just as indigestible was the fact that Jaina Solo had commandeered the *Ksstarr* for her own blasphemous usage. Domain Kraal's inability to defend Borleias had allowed all these disgraces to occur, and it was now up to Domain Cha to restore the honor of the Yuuzhan Vong.
Ignoring the planets and stars streaming by the bridge, Wyrpuuk Cha studied the blaze bugs on his ship's grid. They were divided up into

small groups, each representing one of the enemy's disgusting metal vessels. From Yun-Harla's agents and from the survivors of Domain Kraal, Wyrpuuk knew exactly how many ships there were, what kind of ship each group had, and where best to strike. He was wary only of falling into the same trap that had befallen the forces of Yun-Yammka. If the enemy was too near a gravity-well, or waiting just outside the system, they would remain undetected and be in a perfect position for ambush.

His plan was a simple one, his fleet would be the mouth of a rakshi hunting beast, drawing in its prey and then snapping shut around it. Mouthful by mouthful, he would devour the enemy fleet, forcing them to overextend themselves, cutting them off a little at a time. He had the warriors and time available. Victory was all but certain. The last communications he received from the infiltrators on the planet was that they were going to sabotage the enemy's defenses and kill the commanders. If they were successful, it made Wyrpuuk's job all the more easier. Perhaps his victory would be swift and decisive enough to earn him praise from Warmaster Tsavong Lah.

Wyrpuuk grinned at that thought, and then promptly returned his attention to the slaughter he knew was to come. With the odds in his favor, there was no other outcome but a complete and total annihilation of the enemy fleet.

[T] [T]

The sun had barely begun to rise when Wedge had received word about the arrival of the Yuuzhan Vong fleet. But, he had more pressing concerns on his mind at the moment; namely, three very skilled Yuuzhan Vong infiltrators who had just cut a swath through the dozen or so security personnel who had moved to cover him. The infiltrators were armed with both blaster and amphistaff, and were using both with deadly efficiency.

"Iella, we need to send word to the fleet, do you think you can get to a shuttle?" Wedge said, staying behind a low wall as the assassins poured a continuous stream of blaster fire while they advanced.

"A little late for that," Iella said, motioning to the burning hulks that decorated the outside of the base. The same team that had taken out the shield generator had also scuttled a good portion of the ships that had been out in the open. To make matters worse, the Yuuzhan Vong outside of the base were launching an attack of their own. All available Jedi were dealing with *that* incursion, leaving a limited defense for the Vong already inside the base.

"Do'ro-ik vong pratte!" A warrior roared, moving to leap over Wedge and Iella's only cover.

The two immediately brought their blasters up and decorated the ambitious warrior's face with blaster bolts. The warrior fell mid-leap, folding over the wall.
"The Twin Suns have their X-wings stationed in the storage yard just across the landing field," Wedge pointed to a location that was currently lit up with blaster fire. "They haven't been answering my attempts to reach them. If you can meet up with Jaina, tell her to take off as soon as she can."
"What about you?" Iella yelled over the din of the blaster fire.
"I've been in worse situations before," Wedge replied. "Besides, you need someone to cover your back."
"On three then," Iella said, releasing a breath even as the blaster fire continued unabated.
"Ready, set, go!" Wedge whirled around the side of the wall and poured covering fire at the remaining two Vong. Iella, in the meantime, took off running.
The two infiltrators, taken off guard by the sudden counter-attack, dove for cover. Wedge continued firing, rapidly back-pedaling after his wife. The two infiltrators burst from cover and began to sprint in a zigzag fashion. Wedge's shots went wide, or scored glancing blows that only seemed to anger the Vong assassins.
"Fine time to be out of shape," Wedge grumbled, breathing heavily as the distance between the infiltrators and himself decreased at a frighteningly fast pace.
Suddenly, from out of the shadows of the biotics facility, a smaller shadow slammed into one of the approaching infiltrators; knocking both to the ground. The other infiltrator looked over his shoulder in shock, and the pause was all Wedge needed. The last of his blaster bolts from his now depleted energy clip scored hits on the infiltrator's throat and upper body, felling the assassin in a heartbeat. Wedge quickly reloaded and retrained his blaster onto the other infiltrator. Meanwhile, the assassin struggled on the ground with the smaller figure.
From the early morning light, Wedge could just barely make out the features of his savior, and he was surprised to see that it was one of Anakin and Tahiri's Freed Ones. The smaller, scarless Vong was armed only with a coufee, which was gripped in both her hands and the hands of the infiltrator. The two struggled for control of the weapon, with the infiltrator gradually coming out on top due to his larger and more muscular frame. Muscles, however, didn't stop blaster fire. Just as the infiltrator wrested the weapon away from the Freed One, Wedge fired again.

The warrior collapsed directly on top of the Freed One, causing her to squeak in surprise.
Fortunately, the Freed One managed to wiggle her way out from under the corpse.
"Thank you," Wedge said, inclining his head when the Freed One got to her feet.
"You welcome."
Wedge blinked. "You would be Taan, then? The others told me of a Freed One who could speak Basic."
"Taan," the Freed One nodded, bending down to retrieve her knife. "And I speak small bit of your tongue, only."
"It's enough. For now, we need to establish communications with the fleet." Wedge looked around and saw the X-wings of Twin Suns streak up into the sky. "Did you come alone?
"Tahiri and another human is following," Taan said. "I will protect Warmaster Antilles until they arrive."
"Warmaster?" Wedge couldn't help but chuckle. "Why not?"
"Come in, Wedge. Do you copy?"
Wedge unclipped his comlink. "I'm fine, Iella. Can you coordinate the ground battle from that outpost? I have a Vong commander to greet."
"Understood. Just be careful, they've already breached the perimeter in several locations. With both Jacen and Anakin in Twin Suns, we're not sure if any got through to the base."
"I'll be careful." He saw Tycho and Tahiri arrive. "Besides, my escort just got here so I should be fine."
"Okay then..." Iella sounded skeptical.
"Relax. I'm just going to lose a space battle on purpose, how hard can that be?
"Wedge, I hate to tell you, dear, but you're a bad loser." The sigh at the end was resigned.
"I know, and I intend to be a very, very bad loser."
[T] [T]
"You sure it was alright for us to take off like that?" Anakin said into his comlink, glancing back at the rapidly shrinking surface of the planet.
"Master Horn and Skywalker can take care of it, Little Brother. We're needed up here," Jaina replied. *"Form up Twin Suns. Rogues, Wild Knights, we're in your hands."*
Reorganized for the addition of the three Solo children, Zekk, Kyp Durron, and Jagged Fel,Twin Suns squadron had the unenviable task of drawing the attention of nearby Yuuzhan Vong forces. It was a great risk having all three Solo children in one squadron, but if it kept the Yuuzhan Vong off kilter even by a little bit, they had done their job.

Assigned to a geosynchronous orbit above the biotics facility, not only would their presence emphasize the exaggerated importance of the location, but it also kept them out of the action until the very last minute. For additional cover, both the Rogues and Wild Knights were set to pick off any targets of opportunity from Borleias to the lunar station on Pyria VI.
"This one wishes you good luck," Saba Sebatyne's raspy voice replied. The leader of the Wild Knights was with Danni Quee in a blastboat, while her son, Tesar, flew in an A-wing.
"Goddess, this is Rogue Leader, we're good to go," Colonel Gavin Darklighter replied.
Both the Rogues and Wild Knights had blasted off of Borleias from hidden locations, which was probably the only thing that saved their fighters from becoming scrap by the Vong infiltrators back on the planet. To have the three most famous squadrons in the fleet lift off from the planet would further bait the Yuuzhan Vong commander and have him focus his attention on the biotics facility.
Anakin checked the readouts coming from his astromech, which had been nicknamed 'Smelly Jawa,' by a mechanic from Tatooine. Salvaged from a junkyard, neglect had eaten away at the droid's wheels, causing it to move at a very slow pace and drag its cylindrical body on the ground. Even after it was repaired, it still retained the name. On the bright side, it had developed a personality of its own and was deathly afraid of its namesake.
"Smelly Jawa," Anakin said. "Divert power from weapons to the engines and shields. We'll be losing this fight so we need to be prepared to run as fast as possible."
The droid whistled mournfully.
"I know, but running is good too," Anakin said with a chuckle. "Don't worry; I won't let the scary Vong scrap you and give you to the Jawas."
"Heads up, coralskippers are launching."
"I copy," Anakin replied, doing one final check of his fighter. He then switched frequency. "This is Twin Suns Nine. Three Flight, check in."
"Ten, standing by," Zindra Daine, his wingmate, said, eagerness in her voice.
"Eleven, everything's green," Tilath Keer, one of the original Twin Suns members reported.
"Twelve, standing by," Twin Suns Twelve was one of the surviving members of Kyp's Dozen and the only other Jedi in Anakin's flight. With the exception of One Flight, All wing-pairs in the squadron were a mix of Jedi and non-Jedi.

Anakin nodded and switch back to the squad frequency.
"Goddess,Three Flight is a go."
"Two Flight is ready as well," Jacen reported.
"Lock S-Foils in attack position. Choose your targets one at a time and conserve your fuel and warheads."
Anakin listened to the mechanical whine as his fighter's wings split. Focusing on the distant Vong fleet, Anakin closed his eyes and locked himself into the Jedi meld Jacen was maintaining. *Here we go again.*
[T] [T]
Wedge focused on the holographic displays in the center of the command room, all the while ignoring the background chatter and computer noises that were amplified by the room's poor acoustic design. Backup generators had kept the room functioning even when the primary power source had been destroyed. It was a good thing, as fighting a space battle in the dark would have been more than difficult. Yet, Wedge didn't like what he was seeing.
The display showed the planets within the Pyria system and a block of red blips representing the Yuuzhan Vong fleet streaming towards their destination. The Vong didn't bother Wedge, it was their formation and destination that did.
"Rogues and Wild Knights are on station," Tycho reported, standing beside Wedge. "The starfighters on the target moon are standing by."
"They're not going for it," Wedge said.
"It looks like it," Tycho nodded. "The main force is still en route to Borleias. Correction, towards the direction of the Twin Suns squadron. ETA seven minutes. But a smaller force has splintered off towards Pyria Six, ETA two minutes."
"Think the spotters on the ground told them that the Solos were up there?"
"I would bet on it," Tycho replied.
Wedge folded his arms and scowled at the screen. "Have the moon base fighters and the *Falcon* launch. Inform Han to fall back to Plan B."
"Done." Tycho said efficiently.
This was one of the times Wedge was grateful that he had competent and trustworthy help. The original choice for the moon garrison, a capable but impatient captain named Yakown Reth, was a good bureaucrat but was short-sighted in combat situations. Yakown had been part of the reinforcements sent by the Advisory Council, no doubt as part of the Council's policy to eliminate the problem officers within the New Republic. Han, seeing Yakown's record, had volunteered both his and Leia's expertise at setting up the faux-base at Pyria VI. Needless to say, Wedge jumped at the opportunity.

Now, if he could only get their kids out of this conflict in one piece.
Wedge followed the unerring path of the Yuuzhan Vong fleet. The Vong were ignoring several decoys and ruining several well thought out scenarios on their path to Borleias. Even the added enticement of having the famous General Solo at Pyria VI didn't seem to be enough. Reaching over to the squadron-based communication system, he flipped a switch.
"Twin Suns, this is central command. The Vong are ignoring the target moon and headed towards you. Sensors show multiple coralskippers and blast boulders leading the charge. Looks like the goddess is their target."
"*Twin Suns Lead copies, central.*"
Wedge swallowed. He wish he had Jaina's calm when he was her age. Then again, that Jedi stuff probably helped too. With nothing else to lose, he keyed the comm one last time. "May the Force by with you. Central command out."
[T] [T]
Han was an unhappy man standing next to an even unhappier man. He wanted to be in the Falcon, which was currently being piloted by Lando. He wanted to be up there fighting, protecting his kids, but he was currently grounded on an unimportant moon. He also wanted a cup of caf after being woken up so early by ear-splitting alarms, but caf had not been high on the priority list of supply transfers. The words 'it's time for Plan B' also didn't help any. Plan B involved using his children as bait. It was the reason why Han had been hoping the Vong commander would be stupid enough to fall for Plan A.
On the bright side, he didn't lack a sense of humor or was painfully dull like the scowling Captain Yakown Reth, next to him. The scowling, very unhappy man who didn't appreciate being relieved of duty by someone even as famous as General Solo. One thing Yakown shared in common with Han, however, was that he had also been ordered to stay on base. Though the initial plan was to have him escort a shuttle full of scientists in one of the bases' E-wings, the switch to Plan B had grounded him. Making him just as grumpy and irritated as ever.
"Cheer up," Han said dryly. "Wedge knows what he's doing."
"I don't see why you enjoy being micromanaged," Yakown muttered, glaring at the haphazard launch of the moon bases' fighters. "Or why this lack of discipline is vital to the general's plan."
"It's meant to confuse dim-witted and incompetent commanders," Han said deadpan. "Think of it as a stress test. If the enemy commander is as confused by it as you, Wedge can take advantage of his ineptitude and string out the fight."

"But the enemy commander appears to have not fallen for the trap," Yakown pointed to the distant specks of the passing Vong fleet, missing Han's insult entirely.
"I know, isn't that great," Han muttered softly, watching the massive force bypass the base and head towards Borleias, towards his children.
"General, captain, we have incoming enemy fighters," one of the technicians in the control tower called out. "A couple of Vong frigates and capital ships are also closing."
"They're trying to keep us from helping out," Han nodded.
"This is Rogue Leader to Pyria Six Moon Base. We're on station and ready to welcome the incoming Vong."
"Rogue Leader, we're moving onto Plan B," Han relayed. "Apparently the Vong commander is either better than expected or the Vong on Borleias sniffed us out."
"Plan B, copy." For Rogue Squadron, Plan B meant that they were not going to feign a retreat as originally planned. Instead, they would create a path for the base's two E-wing squadrons, enabling the extra squadrons to reinforce Twin Suns back at Borleias. The Wild Knights would meet the Rogues half-way, and both would play havoc with the enemy's starfighters.
The moon base shook as the distant Yuuzhan Vong cruisers began to take pot-shots at their location.
"We have enemy troop transports inbound."
"Okay, this place has done its job," Han said. "Issue the evacuation order and everyone get to their designated ships."
As the control tower cleared, Han moved over to one of the panels and opened a latch. Beneath it were two key holes. Yakown pulled out an old fashion metal key, similar to the one Han also dug out of his pants. Without any further words, both turned their respective keys. Immediately, all the screens in the room showed a countdown in ominous red numbers.
"And I was just getting fond of this place too," Han sighed, glancing around the vacant room. He activated his comlink. "*Lady Luck*, this is General Solo. Captain Reth and I will be there shortly, go ahead and begin your start up sequence. Hopefully, when this place goes up, it'll take a few important Vong with it."
[T] [T]
"That's a lot of fighters!" The alarmed voice of Zindra Daine came over Anakin's comlink, as a literal tide of coralskippers streamed out from the Yuuzhan Vong capital ships.
"Don't worry, the Wild Knights and the E-wings will leave us plenty of targets," Anakin said lightly, though he too felt some apprehension.

Being able to sense the Vong through his lightsaber meant that unlike most of the others, he could actually feel the approaching Yuuzhan Vong.
Through his Force bond with his older brother, Anakin realized that he wasn't the only one. Anakin quickly tried to clamp down on his feelings of disbelief and twinges of anger, lest they leak into the battle meld and disturb the other Jedi. It was a fine way for Jacen to let him know that they shared the same unique ability. Maybe they could have even worked on it together. He could sense Jacen's own feelings on the matter. Regret, tinged with something Anakin couldn't identify. Maybe guilt? A secret satisfaction that he had matched his younger brother in terms of knowledge of the Force. Anakin quickly blocked all of it out. He didn't need the added conflict at the moment.
"*Heads up, Twin Suns. Shadow Bombs on my mark.*" Jaina's voice snapped both her brothers' attentions back to the situation at hand. The coralskippers got closer. *"Release Shadow Bombs."*
Even the non-Jedi members of the squadron released their payloads, their torpedoes modified to detonate remotely or by proximity. It was the brainchild of a brainstorming session between Jagged, Jaina, and Kyp, who were trying to find a way to make their weapons more effective against the void-like defenses employed by the Vong ships. The modified torpedoes would act like floating mines, using the momentum and trajectory of the fighter it was launched from to provide its initial course. The course wouldn't be adjustable, since any propulsion would give away its position, but the overall concept was similar to the Force-powered Shadow Bombs launched by the Jedi.
The Yuuzhan Vong fighter force continued to approach, unaware of the danger that lay before them. Then, disaster struck the lines of the alien invaders. The twenty-four plus Shadow Bombs detonated as the first fighters passed. Entire squadrons of coralskippers were caught up in the chain-like wave of explosions, vanishing in a blinding flash.
"*Wow,*" Zindra's hushed whisper could be heard, as the last of the Shadow Bombs flared incandescently.
"It's only just started, Ten," Jaina remarked. *"Pick your targets and go."*
Sure enough, no sooner had the last of the fires died in the vacuum of space, then an angry hoard of coralskippers shot out of the wrecks of their dead brethren like a swarm of hungry insects.
The New Republic starfighters darted straight down the center of the furious swarm, their cockpits lighting up as flashes of molten plasma erupted all around them.
Anakin sent his X-wing into a dizzying spin as he dodged and weaved around the oncoming coralskippers. He released a Shadow Bomb into

his wake, and was able to turn another two Vong fighters into burning balls of gas. Entering a sharp turn, he fell in behind another coralskipper, and with Force-guided precision, used his lasers to eat away its aft section. His fighter rocked as a coralskipper swerved onto his tail. Another loop and a crushing dive later, Anakin managed to lose his pursuit.
"Still with me Twin Suns Ten?" Anakin said, checking his control panel for the status of his wingman.
"Barely! Where'd you learn how to fly?"
"Now that you mention it, I don't think I ever received any official training." Even as Anakin spoke, his fighter was rocked from the shockwave of a nearby exploding missile.
"You're joking?"
"Sorry," Anakin remarked, bring his fighter into a breakneck climb before juking sideways.
Twin Suns Ten just managed to match his maneuver as two more plasma missiles exploded around them. *"Now I'm jealous. I've been in the military for four years and I could barely keep up with you."*
Anakin grinned. "One of the many perks of being a Jedi, you can bypass flight school."
"Twin Suns Nine, this is the Raven's Claw. Would you and your flight care to assist us and the Falcon on a run against those blast boulders spraying missiles everywhere?"
"We'll be on your wing. Twin Suns Ten, Eleven, and Twelve, form up."
"Raven's Claw, Ten here. Do you mean the blast boulders right in front of that frigate and light cruiser?" Zindra remarked faintly.
"Those are the ones."
"Heh, great. Remind me not to sign up for any future Solo outing. They're crazy."
"Just figuring that out, Daine?" The voice of Kyle Katarn added, humor clear in his voice. *"Why do you think we're asking your flight lead to help out?"*
Anakin sighed. "Okay, enough with the comedy routine. *Raven's Claw*, how do you want to do this?"
"The blast boulders are the primary targets. Their missiles are preventing the reinforcements from Pyria VI from breaking through. As it is, we'll be coming in from that direction. We hope to sandwich them between your fire and our own."
"And the frigate and cruiser?"
"If we can get those blast boulders to stop firing, several of our own light cruisers will pound those two. We just have the fun task of distracting them until then."

"Roger," Anakin glanced at his sensor readout. "I got eight blast boulders on sensors."
"We got eight as well."
"Even split? Tagging the four for my flight."
"Targets designated. We got the rest. Hope you're as good a flier as your sister."
"I've been told I have some skill," Anakin said dryly, smiling as he heard Zindra groan. "Twin Suns Three Flight, let's get going."
The four X-wings veered out of the main dogfight, receiving some cover from Jacen's Two Flight in the process. The blast boulders, misshapen rock-like constructs that could easily be mistaken for an asteroid, were firing wave after wave of plasma bursts at various targets. Some were firing into the dogfight, others at the New Republic capital ships that were cresting over the hemisphere of Borleias.
On Anakin's order, Twin Suns Twelve pushed a Shadow Bomb between two blast boulders and the frigate they were using as cover. The detonation blasted chunks out of all three targets, but the actual damage was minimal. As the line of blast boulders scattered, the singed frigate was already in the process of repairing the glowing burn left by the blast.
"Eleven, Twelve, take the damaged boulder looping around. Then fall onto designated target number three. Ten, we got the other damaged one making a break for the cruiser. Then we'll hit target number one."
"I copy."
The damaged blast boulder's speed was no match for that of an X-wing's, and both Anakin and Zindra caught up with the fleeing gunship. Unfortunately for them, however, the Vong cruiser had adjusted course and was now laying down a sheet of covering fire.
"Um, are we going to do anything about that cruiser?"
Anakin shook his head ruefully, bouncing his fighter back and forth in a random, Force-guided pattern. Though he was sure a more seasoned pilot or commander would scold Zindra for her lack of military professionalism, he was neither military nor a professional of any sort. In fact, he was pretty sure Zindra, being over five years old than him, had more experience in an X-wing than he did.
"I'll take the lead, follow me in."
"You are buying me a drink when we get back to Borleias, Nine."
"Can't, under age," Anakin quipped, glancing upwards as a plasma burst sprinkled heated debris over the top of his X-wing.
"Blue milk, then. Geez, way to make me feel old."
An alarm blared and Anakin saw the insectoid face of a grutchin pop out of one of the floor boards. He quickly activated his lightsaber and

burned it to a crisp. Hoping that the Vong bioweapon hadn't chewed through anything important, Anakin quickly returned his attention to the rain of plasma all around them. The frigate had moved into position close to the cruiser and was now sandwiching them with additional plasma fire.
"I'm hit!"
"What's the damage!"
"Starboard engine took on plasma damage. Decreasing power from the port engine to compensate."
Anakin felt a premonition in the Force. "Ten! Dive now! One of the gunners is tracking your trajectory, dive!"
Anakin steered towards the plasma cannon lining up on his wingman and poured laser fire into the protruding bulb. The cruiser's void defenses absorbed his lasers, and after firing off several salvos at Twin Suns Ten, the plasma nub turned in his direction. He continued to fire, timing his flight path so that his fighter flew through an area just as the ship's voids deactivated. Anakin pulled hard on the steering column, his X-wing skimming the surface of the Vong cruiser and narrowly avoiding the point-blank blast of superheated plasma.
Now between the ship's defenses and the actual ship itself, Anakin flew just above its coral surface, dropping two torpedoes into an important looking structure. His X-wing was rocked by repeated fire. An alarm blared to indicate a complete failure of his deflector shields. The torpedoes detonated, blowing a fatal gash in the ship's mid-section. Just when he wondered how he'd get clear without getting blasted by bits, Anakin saw Zindra's starfighter swerve into view. Zindra's X-wing was missing two of its S-foils and looked pretty charred, but it didn't seem to matter. Her fighter's remaining weapons opened up with punishing laser fire, pounding the wound he had ripped open with his torpedoes. She then released two torpedoes of her own and pulled up as the warheads flared violently; triggering secondary ruptures up and down the ship. Anakin quickly veered upwards as well, rejoining his wingman in a hasty retreat.
"*Falcon, Claw,* this is Twin Suns Nine. I'm sorry, but we couldn't get our targets. Blast boulders tagged One and Two are still active." Behind them, the Yuuzhan Vong cruiser shuddered from multiple explosions, and then snapped in two. The movement caused more parts to break off, one of which slammed into the nearby frigate and tore into its bridge. The frigate shuddered, before it too was snapped in half by a spinning section of the much larger cruiser. Both capital ships continued to break apart from the momentum, spilling coral and bodies

everywhere. "Ten and I have taken some damage but we're still functional. Repeat, two of the blast boulders are still active."
Several long seconds of silence greeted his cheerful report.
[T] [T]
Jaina would have chuckled at her brother's report if she wasn't too busy trying to stay alive. The coralskippers were relentless in their assault on the remaining members of Twin Suns, and survival was looking less and less likely.
"Four, watch it, coming in from above!"
"Eight here, I've just lost an S-foil."
"Six is EV! Six is..."
Jaina checked the sensors. Twin Suns Seven was now a glowing ball of gas. She swore angrily and took her frustrations out on the nearest coralskipper. Yet another pilot had died on her watch. She felt both Kyp and Zekk try to draw away her anger through the meld, and she exhaled. If anger was going to cloud her judgment and get others killed, she decided on a different approach. She might as well not feel at all. Similar to flipping a switch, she did her best to shut out all of her feelings. They were an unnecessary distraction. What she needed now was the pilot and Jedi part of her that would lead the others out of this battle.
"One Flight," Jaina said coolly. "We're going to make a run directly at the nearest Vong capital ship and burn it. The rest of Two Flight, cover us."
"One Flight copies." Her wingman, Jagged intoned.
"Two Flight confirms," Jacen sounded wary, but Jaina was glad that he kept any disagreement private. Since Six was EV and Seven was down, only Twin Suns Five and Eight remained. They wouldn't be much cover.
"Three Flight rejoining the squadron. You miss us?" Anakin said cockily. He had good reason, considering he and a torn up X-wing just took down two capital ships by themselves. And now, as his four X-wing flight re-entered the dog-fight guns blazing, they racked up a couple more kills.
"You're welcome to join us, just leave some ships for us, Little Brother," Jaina replied.
"Will do, Goddess."
Jaina rolled her eyes and set the throttle on full. Her X-wing lurched through the snubfighter filled space like a rocket. Behind her, Kyp's, Jagged's, and Zekk's fighters followed. It had been decided that as a Goddess, her flight had to be unique from the rest of her squadron. Thus the second wing-pair made up only of Jedi. It was a testament to

Jag's skill that the clawcraft pilot could keep up with the three Jedi in his flight with seemingly little effort.
As anticipated, a swarm of coralskippers made a bee-line for her fighter. But just as they had worked out in the meld, Anakin and Jacen's flights bounced in behind the pursuing fighters and lit them up. In the meantime, knowing that her flight's back was covered, Jaina continued towards another Yuuzhan Vong frigate.
Its gunners seemed to recognize the threat four fighters presented and opened up, but Jaina took her flight in a spiraling loop around the oncoming plasma. The guns tried to track her, but she was always one step ahead of them.
"Inputting coordinates, fire all Shadow Bombs at designated area in five," Jaina ordered, not at all fazed by the flashing explosions lighting up her cockpit. "Five. Four. Three. Two. One. Release Shadow Bombs."
Four silent and deadly payloads flew out of the launchers of the three X-wings and one clawcraft. The explosives tumbled through space as the X-wings continued their approach to the target.
To the crew of the ship, it looked as if the X-wings were about to open up with a laser barrage.
The fighters, however, veered away at the last possible second.
The payloads detonated, and the resulting explosion completely shattered the frigate into burning shards of coral. The victory was short-lived, however.
"Goddess, I have a problem here." Zekk's voice sent a chill up Jaina's spine.
"Four?"
"The explosion shook something loose that had been damaged by a coralskipper earlier. Steering column's stuck and my speed's locked at one-third power."
"One Flight. Goddess. The coralskippers are coming back, many more this time," Anakin warned. This meant that if Zekk ejected, it would be an almost certain death sentence. On the flip side, if they tried to stay behind and escort him out, they'd all be swamped by another wave of fighters.
"Goddess. I recommend you escort Four out." Jagged's voice came over the comm, stunning Jaina even further. *"I'll make a run and draw their fire."*
Jaina's heart jolted once more. So much for being an unfeeling pilot.
"Neg that, Two! We're *all* getting out of this."
"It is simple logic, Goddess. A Jedi can offer more in this war than a non-Jedi pilot can. We are all expendable, just some more than most."
Jagged's clawcraft was already separating from the group. *"Have*

confidence in my abilities. It will take more than overwhelming odds to kill me."
"Damn it! Two! Get back into formation, that's an order!" Jaina yelled, panic filling her as her gazed jumped back and forth between Zekk's damaged fighter and the clawcraft shrinking from her view.
"Didn't copy your last, Goddess," Jag replied shortly. *"Good luck."*
"No! Two! Jag! Don't you dare do this!" Jaina's heart was lurching painfully as she gripped the steering yoke in a white-knuckled grip. Her mind felt like a superheated piece of metal being rapidedly cooled and hammered the wrong way. Brittle and on the verge of shattering into many little pieces. It was a helpless sensation she wasn't used to feeling. Something that left her frozen in terror.
Yet, before Jag could get too far away and her heart could leap from her chest, new voices filled the comm-channel.
"Three Flight will follow you in, Two," Anakin said.
"Two Flight will escort One Flight until Twin Suns Four is secure," Jacen added. Both he and Anakin did their best to soothe their sister's frayed nerves, reminding her that she wasn't alone in this war.
"Don't worry, Jaya," Anakin said lightly over a private channel. *"We've got this. It's just another Solo family outing after all."*
Jaina swallowed, her mouth and throat dry as her grip on the steering yoke slowly eased. "You guys are the best brothers ever."
"Your orders, Goddess?" Jacen prompted, sensing his sister's mind return to a functioning state. *"The skips will be within firing range soon."*
Jaina shook herself from her daze and switched back to the squadron frequency. "Twin Suns Two, you lead Three Flight and cover our retreat. You better survive this so I can discipline you for disobeying my previous orders."
"Understood."
"Two Flight, follow us out. We'll try to snag your EV pilot on our way."
"Roger," Jacen agreed.
"Let's go Twin Suns." Jaina said, filled with new determination. "It's time to give the Vong commander an even bigger headache."
[T] [T]
Wyrpuuk Cha furrowed his brow as he saw the blaze bugs representing several ships on the edge of his fleet's formation, scurry off the board.
"Has the enemy's forces from the moon caught up already?"
"No great one, Guurin Cha's flagship reports that only two ships were able to break out before his blockade was put into place. They are effectively contained at their base."
"Have they demonstrated any new tactics? Weapons?"

"No. But in the region where we lost the *Night Star, Blood Claw,* and *Creeping Death* we are taking heavy yorik-et loses."
"Then that must be where Jaina Solo is." Wyrpuuk said calmly. "If they have no new tactics or weapons, then they are fighting on pure spirit. Unlike our warriors, they fear death. Once Jaina Solo is in our hands, they will learn that there are things far worse. Concentrate the fleet on that region. When Guurin has captured their moon outpost, have him join us and cut off their escape route. We will break their forces, then we shall break their spirit."
[T] [T]
"Arrival in three…two…one…mark."
The reversion back to real space was not like anything Sair Yonka, captain of the Imperial Star Destroyer *Freedom*, had expected. The massive shadow of the ship he was escorting, the *Lusankya,* temporarily blocked their view. But when the Super Star Destroyer began to veer away using its emergency thrusters and firing all of its batteries in an almost panicked fashion, Sair could easily see why. They had come out of hyperspace in the middle of a Yuuzhan Vong fleet. Worse, their course had them on a collision course with a Vong capital ship.
"Evasive maneuvers!" Sair barked, though he didn't really have to give the order. A majority of the people in the bridge were part of the same crew he had had ever since he had defected to the then Rebel Alliance. Their experience and Imperial backgrounds were clear as they operated like a well-oiled machine.
Collision alarms sounded, and Sair gripped a nearby bulkhead as the bottom of the *Freedom* plowed across the top of the Vong vessel they had nearly crashed into. At the same time, however, the gunnery crews let loose with all the weapons the *Freedom* had to bear.
"The *Lusankya* is launching its fighters," one of the sensor operators called out.
Yonka winced at Commander Eldo Davip's ineptitude. They were surrounded on all sides by Vong capital ships, with a majority of them firing on the Super Star Destroyer. If the Vong commander was competent at all, then the enemy fire would be directed towards the *Lusankya*'s hangar bay, one of the ship's most vulnerable areas. To launch fighters at this time would just get the pilots killed and waste starfighters.
"This isn't an ambush, the Vong must have been attacking Borleias," Sair said, quickly evaluating the situation. "Can you establish where the battle lines are?"
"No, sir. But I can tell you that we're on the wrong side of them."

"Thank you, Lieutenant," Sair's sarcasm matching that of his subordinate. Sair Yonka had been retired, enjoying the married life and watching over his son and step-daughter, when the Yuuzhan Vong had invaded. Like many of the retired soldiers, he answered the call to arms and re-enlisted, even getting his old command back. Even better, once word got out that he was once again at the *Freedom*'s helm, most of his old crew re-enlisted as well. It was good to be around trusted, friendly faces, when staring death in the eye. "Set a course for Borleias and tell Commander Davip to follow us out. We want to keep moving and not get penned in here."
"Sir! Two Vong cruisers are trying to squeeze us in."
From his position on the bridge, Sair could see the two organic capital ships move into position on either side of his own. Bolts of green and blue energy flared up from the *Freedom*'s ion and turbolaser batteries, while waves of yellow poured in from either side of his ship.
"Continue to rotate the shields and lead the *Lusankya* out," Sair ordered. "We want to stay as intact as possible and I doubt General Antilles has any use for a wrecked Super Star Destroyer."
[T] [T]
"Detonation of the base on Pyria Six confirmed," Tycho reported. "Rogues have broken through the token force the Vong commander left behind."
"Wild Knights and Twin Suns still combating enemy fighters, they report only three pilots EV, one dead." Another officer added. "But enemy capital ships have shifted formation and are moving in."
"The Yuuzhan Vong commander knows what he wants," Tycho nodded. "He's targeting this facility and he knows Jaina is defending it."
"Very well," Wedge said wearily.
An all-out assault was one of the possibilities that he, Tycho, and Anakin Solo had come up with. It was also one that would help them the least. An all-out assault meant that many people would die on one side or the other. The fact that the New Republic force couldn't afford heavy loses, meant that they would have to literally cripple the Vong fleet. Unfortunately, if they killed too many Vong, their commander would be forced to retreat completely. Kill too little, and New Republic casualties rose. They had to hold out and take out enough of the Vong fleet to make their commander withdraw, but not all the way.
Wedge was about to give the order for the *Mon Mothma* and *Rebel Dream* to jump in, when, over the din of the room, he heard several confused sounding voices coming from the communications section. Frowning, he glanced over and saw Iella leaning over one of the comm-

officers, a puzzled scowl on her face. A perplexed Iella was never a good thing.
Iella, seeing that she had his eye, raised her voice above the clamor all around. "Super Star Destroyer *Lusankya* reports that she is in system with the Imperial Star Destroyer *Freedom*. They arrived in the middle of the Yuuzhan Vong force and are inflicting heavy damage on the enemy. They are also taking damage and request an escort to get clear."
The room, as loud as it had been only moments earlier, practically became a tomb.
"What?" Tycho blurted in disbelief.
Wedge shook his head to clear it. "Confirm identification." He leaned on the holoprojector. "Bring up that portion of the battle zone."
Tycho manipulated the controls on the console in front of him, and the region representing the Yuuzhan Vong fleet was suddenly magnified. In the middle of a cluster of red blips were two green markers. Several nearby red blips disappeared and the green markers were on an outward trajectory.
"Identities confirmed," Iella said. "The *Freedom*, Captain Sair Yonka, who sends his greetings. *Lusankya*, Commander Davip commanding."
"*Commander* Davip?" Wedge's eyebrow shot up. If he needed any evidence that the New Republic Advisory Council had truly thrown in the towel, it was the fact that they had left a Super Star Destroyer in the hands of a mere commander instead of a full admiral. The fact that the commander had a long record of indecisiveness and poor decision making didn't make it any better at all. "And Captain Yonka?"
"Yes," Iella nodded, she placed a hand on her ear piece as another report came in. "And he's just reported that the *Lusankya* and *Freedom* have taken out what they think is the command ship of the Vong fleet."
Wedge smiled faintly at hearing the *Freedom*'s name. He was, after all, the reason Sair Yonka had defected in the first place. Well, himself and a giant suitcase full of credits. "Who's closest to the engagement? Scratch that. Who's unengaged and capable of making a micro-jump to the engagement zone?"
"*Mon Mothma,*" Tycho answered succinctly. "And the *Rebel Dream*. Another minute or two and we can have another six ships make the jump."
"Danni Quee reports detection of two yammosk kills," Iella said. "One minute apart. A third yammosk was detected withdrawing out of the system. The Yuuzhan Vong fleet are no longer battle-coordinated."

"At least we have some good news," Wedge exhaled. "Without the commander or the yammosks, the Vong won't be very disciplined anymore."
"Of course they don't need to be coordinated to destroy a ship the size of the *Lusankya*." Tycho remarked.
Wedge nodded. Unfortunately, with the death of the enemy commander, and the current, confused, state of the Yuuzhan Vong fleet, it was no longer possible to prolong the conflict. Quickly coming up with a new strategy to save the Star Destroyers, Wedge relayed what he needed to Tycho and the rest of the New Republic forces. Once that was done, he finally took a seat and rubbed at his forehead.
"Tycho, we're about to achieve a tremendous victory we don't want."
Tycho smiled faintly. "We'll put that in your biography. General Antilles was so good he couldn't fail when he tried to."
"Thanks."
[T] [T]
Borleias Occupation, Day 10
"You there!"
Anakin looked over his shoulder and saw a woman with short, spiky dark hair in a New Republic flight suit make a beeline for him. "Sorry?"
"Lieutenant Zindra Daine, Twin Suns Ten. And before you make a remark about me being so young, it's just a field promotion," Zindra held out a hand. "Didn't get a chance to thank you the other day for saving my butt. Oh, and for scaring the seven-blazes out of me."
Anakin gave her lopsided grin and used the Force to float a bottle over to her. "Here you go, one bottle of blue milk, just like you requested."
Zindra hesitantly ran her hands over and under the floating bottle, before plucking it out of mid-air. "Cute."
"Another one of the many benefits of being a Jedi," Anakin grinned, then motioned to Tahiri who was in the chair next to him. "By the way, Zindra, this is my girlfriend, Tahiri. Tahiri, this is my wingmate from yesterday."
"Thanks for looking after him," Tahiri said, shaking Zindra's hand. "Pull up a seat."
"I'd love to, but I'm actually here for the two of you," Zindra took a swig of milk. "General Antilles wanted to talk to both of you about the Vong you've been training."
"Yuuzhan Vong," Tahiri automatically corrected, then softened her tone when Zindra took a step back in surprise and Anakin squeezed her hand lightly. "Sorry. Calling them 'Vong' is one of the greatest insults you can give them. It's the difference between calling them the 'children of the supreme god' and just 'children.'"

Zindra took in the information slowly, glancing hesitantly at the two Jedi before her. "I…Can I still call the warriors we vape, 'Vong'?"
Tahiri's feelings of apprehension disappeared at Zindra's acceptance, and the young blond Jedi smiled and nodded. "I guess I shouldn't worry about hurting *their* feelings."
"Anyways, General Antilles was going to make a decision regarding your *Yuuzhan* Vong friends. Something about rewarding them for helping out yesterday."
"That's great news," Anakin smiled, hopping off the bar stool.
"Oh, and he wanted to know if it was okay to paint half a Vong cruiser and frigate on the side of your X-wing."
"You got the other half?" Anakin said. They left the lounge and headed for Wedge's office.
"Yup, that was so crazy! I can't believe we actually managed to do that. Heck, I can't believe we came out of that alive."
"That's a common theme when you're near Anakin," Tahiri said perkily. "Get away while you still can."
Zindra looked at the teen, her eyes sorrowful. "Unfortunately I've been permanently assigned as your boyfriend's wingmate. Apparently, when you destroy a cruiser and frigate together, the powers-that-be think you make a good team."
"Maybe you can bribe General Antilles with bottles of blue milk," Tahiri said. "He might change his mind. I've heard milk is good for old people's bones."
The door to Wedge's office opened. Wedge raised an eyebrow at the trio. "I'm not old enough that my hearing's gone."
Tahiri blushed. "Old people are great. They have loads of experience and…"
"Stop while you're ahead," Wedge said dryly.
"Shutting up now."
"I brought the two Jedi as ordered, sir," Zindra saluted.
"At ease," Wedge inclined his head. He then motioned to Face, Tycho, Kyle, and Luke. "Before you arrived, us old folks were discussing the actions of the Freed Ones in yesterday's battle. Though we were unable to recover the one called Shaeri from the Vong forces, the others performed above and beyond the call of duty. My own life was saved by Taan, while countless others report the selfless acts performed by the rest of your students."
"About Shaeri, sir," Tahiri said timidly. "Is it possible we can launch a rescue mission? The other Yuuzhan Vong won't kill her right away. It's more likely they'll torture her until she confesses she was wrong to defy the gods."

Wedge walked over to a view port and stared out at the jungle. "Before yesterday, I would not have even considered wasting effort to find a Vong."
"Yuuzhan Vong!" Zindra blurted, then realizing where she was, flushed. "Sir."
Wedge glanced at her questioningly and Zindra stared at the ceiling. "Sir, to call them 'Vong,' is an insult. If they are our allies, we should call them Yuuzhan Vong and give them the respect they deserve. Sir."
Tahiri looked at Zindra as if she was seeing the older pilot in a new light, while Anakin did his best to hide his amusement. It wasn't every day your new wingman turns out to be one of the few open-minded individuals left in the military.
"Yuuzhan Vong it is," Wedge remarked with a smile. "As I was saying, until yesterday, the idea of expending resources to save a Yuuzhan Vong would have seemed ridiculous to me. But, if you are sure that she is alive, we'll do our best to find and save her."
"Thank you," Tahiri murmured gratefully.
"So, back to the original reason why I called you here. Out of the six others you were training, four were badly hurt helping to defend this place or saving the life of one of my soldiers. The other two played crucial roles in turning back new attempts to infiltrate the base. After yesterday's performance, I would like to give you my full cooperation in helping to further train and integrate their skill sets into the New Republic forces. I understand the idea won't be wildly popular, so they will serve more as a special forces, working parallel to the others, instead of with them.""Wow," Anakin could not believe his ears. "Uncle Luke. You approve of this as well?"
"I talked it over with the others masters and we agreed," Luke nodded. "It is clear that they are willing to help us. The Freed Ones didn't have to do what they did yesterday, but they chose their side."
"We also have a slightly selfish motive," Kyle said. "New Republic Intel is planning to infiltrate Coruscant in the coming weeks and we'd like for your group of Freed Ones to join us. Their main goal will be to start an underground resistance network within the Yuuzhan Vong hierarchy."
"Keep in mind," Face spoke up, sipping from a thermos. "This mission won't be for another week or two. You'll have plenty of time to give your friends additional training. Also, if it's alright with you, I'd like my people to teach your Freed Ones how to work some of our technology. We thought up a couple of things that'd make their job a little easier."
Tahiri gave an energetic salute. "Great, then we'll get started as soon as we can."
[T] [T]

Jaina did her best to pretend that she wasn't watching Zekk service his battle-scarred X-wing out in the landing field. Tried not to care that he had removed his shirt due to the oppressively damp heat of Borleias and had the sun glinting off his lean, yet toned, form. He was physically attractive in a roguish sense. She had never denied that. But was she still attracted to him emotionally? When she had been forced to choose between staying behind to escort him to safety and leaving him to get the rest of her squadron clear, a painful sinking sensation had filled her stomach. Just because she didn't want to get close to him for fear he'd be hurt by her death didn't mean she wanted him to die either.

She reluctantly looked away. Though she was perched atop the Twin Suns' private hangar, Jedi always had the uncanny ability to know when they were being watched. The last thing she wanted to do was to be caught staring at her former best friend.

Former best friend.

Did she even consider him a friend?

Of course she should, they'd gone through a lot together. But did it mean that they were *still* friends? That she still had the same feelings she had once had for him? Jaina clenched her jaw and focused on her new target, desperate to think about something other than the young man who had her head and heart tied up in knots.

Of course her gaze just had to settle on a clawcraft and its human pilot instead. Jaina swore softly and immediately trained her eyes on the distant jungle. Since that moment when Jag told her to choose, he had respectfully kept his distance. Even his comm transmissions to her during the battle had been kept to the bare minimum, none of the usual dry wit or subtle chastisements that she had grown used to. The comments he made towards the end of the battle, when he had nearly sacrificed himself to get the others clear, had been the most he had said to her for what seemed like an eternity. Strangely enough, not talking to him only made her realized how important he had become to her. Nearly losing him to a stupid, noble, self-sacrificing stunt had also amplified those feelings.

Jaina groaned and stared up at the sky.

And she was supposed to be evaluating her non-existent relationship with Zekk. Not the non-existent one she had with Jag.

Wanted to have with Jag.

Jaina slumped at that thought and let her forehead touch the tops of her knees.

"Your thoughts betray you, my apprentice," Kyp Durron's voice said with amusement.

"Former apprentice," Jaina corrected.
"Once my apprentice, always my apprentice," Kyp said with a friendly grin, ignoring her half-hearted glare. He sat down on the vent housing next to her and offered her a canteen, one of two in his possession. The metal surface of the spherical drink container was covered in condensation, betraying its chilled status. "Care for a drink? I don't think it can get any hotter out here."
Jaina looked at Kyp suspiciously. "What do you want, Kyp?"
"That's 'Master' Durron to you, Solo," Kyp wagged a finger.
"Fine, 'Master' Durron," Jaina said sardonically, taking the canteen. "What do you want?"
Kyp motioned to the landing field. "I saw you brooding up here, thought I'd see what about."
Jaina took a swig and grimaced as the alcohol burned its way down her throat. It was a pleasant distraction from the large pain in the neck that had taken a seat next to her. "When'd my personal life become any business of yours, 'Master' Durron?"
"Fine, go back to Kyp," Kyp muttered. "How you can make the word 'master' sound so insulting…"
"It's a trick I picked up from my dad," Jaina remarked. "Now answer my question and I might answer yours."
Kyp raised an eyebrow. "Well, for one, Goddess. We just scored a major victory. You should be celebrating, not doing your best storm-cloud impersonation."
"Go on," Jaina glared. All the frustration she had been feeling was boiling to the surface, and she had a strange hunch that Kyp was being annoying on purpose.
"Two. You're my squadron leader," at Jaina's challenging expression, Kyp relented. "And I feel some obligation to you since you're also my former apprentice. I'm naturally concerned for your well-being."
"Is that it?" Jaina down the rest of the contents of the canteen in one long swig.
"Three. Being a Jedi doesn't keep us from getting sunburnt, and if you stay out here any longer in that tank-top, you'll get baked pretty badly. Not to mention you'll get some pretty strange tan-lines," Kyp finished. "I don't think Yun-Harla goes around frying herself in the sun, no matter how into pain the Vong are."
Jaina's glare lessened and she turned back to her original focus. "You're fortunate I'm not feeling too godly at the moment. Otherwise I'd be throwing you off this roof."

Kyp followed her gaze and then nodded in understanding, unscrewing the cap of his own canteen. "Ah, affairs of the heart it is. Definitely a problem for us mortals. Didn't think the divine could have them too."
Jaina glanced sharply back up at Kyp and, to wipe his cocky smirk off his face as he drank, asked, "If you were me, who would you rather bed, Master Durron?"
Kyp promptly spat out the mouthful of drink he had just consumed, coughing violently. "Excuse me?"
"Well, you are my master. Concerned with my well-being and mental sanity. Aren't you going to give your poor, confused apprentice some advice?"
"As you so kindly noted earlier, I'm your *former* master," Kyp said.
"But a goddess such as me can't comprehend this. Who would I be better off with? Can't a wise, old master like yourself enlighten me? "
"You really didn't need to add the 'old' part," Kyp mock glared. "And why must you insist on asking the only Jedi Master on Borleias who's single?"
"You did come up here to talk me out of my brooding state," Jaina said. "If *you* stay up here too long, you'll get crispy too."
Kyp cleared his throat. "Fine, I shall answer your question the way all wise, old Jedi Masters answer such difficult problems."
"Kyp."
He, however, ignored the warning tone in her voice. "When troubled your feelings are, meditate on them you must. Trust in the Force, you will, and the answers you shall have."
Jaina gestured and Kyp's canteen emptied its contents onto his lap.
"Real mature, Solo." Kyp said rolling his eyes. "That was expensive stuff you know. Cost me an arm and a leg to get it from Lando."
"Masters are supposed to help, not antagonize their students," Jaina retorted, her lips twitching as a smile threatened to appear. "Could you have said a more useless piece of advice?"
Kyp was pensive for a moment, then he nodded. "Okay, how about this one? If hots for a guy you have, hide in a freezer you must. Impure your thoughts must not be."
"That wasn't an invitation!" Jaina groaned. "And if I retract the 'old' part of your title, will you lay off the Yoda talk?"
"Try, I will. Hard to stop once I start, it is," Kyp smirked.
This time Jaina really did smile as she reached over to give Kyp a playful shove. "Nerf-for-brains."
"Hey, I'm at least as smart as a lizard-monkey," Kyp said in his defense, grinning as well. "Come on off the roof, Solo. We can talk more inside if you want."

Jaina sighed, but nodded and got up. "Fine. But you still haven't answered my question the way a wise Jedi Master would. Who would you pick, Zekk or Jag?"
"This is extremely hypothetical and wrong on so many levels," Kyp moaned, taking one last look at both pilots. "Are you sure you can't talk to another Jedi about this?"
"You're the one that knows me best," Jaina pointed out.
"If I had known you better, I wouldn't have come up onto the roof and be forced to answer such an awkward question," Kyp said dryly. "Besides, why is my opinion so important to you anyways?"
The two climbed down a ladder and into the hangar. They were alone save for Danni, Iella, and the holocam operator, Tam Elgrin. The former was showing the latter two some type of Vong device and appeared to be engrossed in her explanation. She gave them a brief wave of acknowledgement, then smiled at Tam and continued her explanation.
Jaina looked back to Kyp, who was waiting for an answer. "Because I can't seem to make up my mind. Some part of me has moved on, wanting someone new. But another part doesn't want to give up what I had. I don't want to hurt Zekk or lose his friendship, but at the same time, I don't know what to think whenever I see him. He hasn't changed a bit since this war has started. Always there, caring and making sure we stay away from the dark side. He's too cautious, but at the same time, he's passionate about those he is close too. If I ever die, I'd hurt him even worse than if I wasn't with him at all. Also, our views have just become too different since the war began."
"And Jagged?"
"He's…well…Jagged," Jaina shrugged helplessly. "Loyal. Disciplined."
"Chiss-like," Kyp provided.
Jaina gave him a side-long glance and rolled her eyes again. "Chiss-like but also human. He may not be a Jedi, but he keeps up with you and me in our shield-trio. He may be a soldier, but he also cares for what he protects. Who he protects. He can interpret his duty to suit his own feelings, and still get the mission accomplished at the same time. He smart, analytical, stubborn…"
"A male version of you without the sense of humor, Force powers, or stunning good looks," Kyp said.
"He has a sense of humor," Jaina defended him. "It's just too refined for you to understand it."
"That must be it," Kyp agreed wholeheartedly. "So you care so much about Zekk, you don't want to hurt him on the ridiculously absurd chance that you somehow die in this war. But you're also crazy for Jagged and his refined sense of humor. Can't you have them battle

each other to the death or something like that? You know, the way those old holovid heroes do it, to see who gets the girl."
"So, I'm a prize now? I thought I was Yun-Harla?" Jaina said archly.
"Any guy who ends up with you is going to feel like a winner," Kyp said hastily.
"Right," Jaina let it slide, mostly because she was still reflecting on her own opinions of Zekk and Jag.
"Okay," Kyp said slowly. "If you really want my opinion about this, I'd go with Jag."
Eyebrows rose. "Really?"
"Look, the guy obviously cares enough about you to let you go find out if you're happier with another guy. Nearly got himself blown up so the two of you could have a chance. That says a lot. You and Zekk are like you and me—history. Sure you're friends with him, best friends at one point. But like you said, you've moved on. Nothings stopping you from still being friends, but don't try to force it into something it isn't. You'll just make each other unhappy in the end."
Jaina glance wryly up at Kyp. "Thanks, Master Durron, for the advice."
Kyp shrugged. "It's what any good master would do."
Jaina began to walk away, but Kyp called out her name one last time. "Kyp?"
"Jaina, whoever you choose, be sure he makes you happy," Kyp said with a nostalgic smile. "And if he doesn't, I'm in line after your brothers to make sure he regrets breaking your heart. I have to protect my apprentice after all."
Jaina's expression softened. For a moment, she looked like the nineteen year old girl she truly was, instead of the battle-hardened Jedi, pilot, and Vong-Goddess-Incarnate with many lives resting on her shoulders. "I will. Thanks again, Kyp. You have your moments."
Kyp tipped an invisible hat. "I try."
[T] [T]
Borleias Occupation, Day 24, Early Morning
Anakin wondered if he was going insane. The last several weeks had been the best ones he had had in a while. Apart from the Vong attack, he had been spending most of his time helping Tahiri train the Freed Ones, spending time with her and developing their budding relationship, making a fragile peace with his older brother, and finding ways to integrate Yuuzhan Vong technology with their own galaxy's tech.
Yet, the urge to run from it all was powerfully strong.
Sure he and Tahiri were going great. But ever since she had embraced the Yuuzhan Vong aspect of her, there was a harshness to her bright

green eyes that hadn't been present before. A determination to help the Freed Ones that bordered on fanatical. She sometimes spoke Yuuzhan Vong to herself, her curses a mix of Basic and the alien tongue. There was no doubt that she was no longer the Tahiri he had grown up with. The one he had had so many adventures with. She made attempts to reign in her more Yuuzhan Vong nature, but wasn't always successful.

Would she still become the Tahiri he had seen in that vision oh so long ago? He didn't know. But he feared that it was a very likely possibility. Worse, he would be the cause of it. Tahiri had embraced the Yuuzhan Vong aspect of her out of her desire to keep him safe. Was his presence what made the vision true? He was afraid to say something about it to her for fear she would take it the wrong way. At that thought, Anakin frowned. He was afraid of her? No. Not of her. Of what she could become. What he had caused her to become.

Maybe they had gotten too close. Maybe everything between them was just a bit too perfect. If he distanced himself from her, if they took a break…Anakin pounded the pillow behind him with his head. The old Jedi saying about the future always being in motion came back to annoy Anakin. It could be that the very act of distancing himself from her was the cause that made her go dark. Or if he didn't distance himself from her, her desire to protect what they have could be used against her and she'd turn dark without even realizing it. His head hurt just trying to divine the possible futures for he and Tahiri.

His next thoughts, however, didn't offer him any relief. There still was that issue he had with his brother. Despite their words to each other, the understanding they had they was tenuous at best. Anakin had a twisting feeling in his gut that they would never really be more than brothers bond only by blood. Some part of him was okay with that. He had grown tired of seeking Jacen's approval, only to be shot down every step he took. Another part protested. Jacen's family. Shouldn't they be making every attempt to patch things up between them? Anakin could no more cut off Jaina or Jacen than he could his own arm. And though with a lightsaber, cutting off his own arm might be pretty easy, it'd be a pain and a waste of a perfectly good arm. It wasn't that they disagreed with each other about the Force or how it should be used. It just seemed the more he accomplished, the more Jacen grew suspicious of his motives, of his actions. Jealousy aside, it was as if his older brother didn't trust him to make sound decisions.

Anakin shifted on his cot restlessly, trying to get at least a few moments of sleep.

Since he had had the vision several weeks ago, he had been unable to meditate in peace. Unable to get a full night's rest. Each time he closed his eyes and stretched out to the Force, a wave of darkness would overwhelm him. Then, he would see visions of a desert planet, an asteroid, towering images of shadowy figures. It was getting to the point where he would have regular dreams, nightmares, about what he'd seen. On top of everything, Anakin couldn't shake the feeling that he was supposed to go to the asteroid in his visions. An asteroid cloaked in darkness and containing many secrets. Maybe secrets that contained the answers he needed.

Was there truly a difference between the dark side and light side of the Force? Was the dark side something to be feared? Should he fear it like his brother? Or was it something to use when your feelings justified its usage, as Jaina had done onboard the ship of Yun-Harla? Maybe it was something else altogether. He had been raised learning one way of the Force, told the dark-side was a forbidden, deadly path. Yet, how was he supposed to completely understand the Force if he only knew of it from one angle? How was he supposed to help end the war, fulfill the expectations of the many who looked to him, if he didn't even know the extent of his own abilities? It was at that moment that he made a decision. It may have been impulsive, rash, but he needed to know once and for all. Would he be a Sith or a Jedi? Or something more?

Sliding out of bed and pulling on a shirt, Anakin silently exited his quarters. It was very early in the morning, the sun had yet to rise. He was careful as he crept past the living quarters of the others, masking his Force-presence by using the lambent in his lightsaber to cloak himself from the other Jedi. It was a trick he had been practicing ever since Hapes, when he realized that Tahiri had disappeared from the Force, but not his Vongsense.

Anakin made it as far as the hangar bay when he realized that he wasn't alone.

"Neat trick." Alema sashayed from the doorway behind him.

"Alema? What are you doing up?"

"I could ask you the same thing." Anakin noticed a second lightsaber hanging from Alema's belt. It was hard to miss considering it was made of both metal parts and yorik coral.

"You like?" Alema canted her hips in his direction as she sauntered past him. "I can't do much with it yet, but Jacen and that creepy bird teacher of his taught me the basics of sensing Vong. When you walked by my door…well, let's just say I was surprised."

"You can go back to bed," Anakin exited a side door and walked towards where the X-wings were stored.

"Nah, I can't go back to bed once I wake up," Alema said, continuing to match each of Anakin's strides.
"Alema." Anakin stopped in his tracks and turned towards the Twi'lek. "Why are you doing this?"
"You're Anakin Solo," Alema said calmly. "Do I need a reason other than that to follow you?"
"I have to do this alone."
"Then I'll follow from a distance," Alema said, losing the playful aura she had been projecting. "It doesn't matter whether it's today or decades from now, there's something about you, Anakin. Something that tells me you'll change this galaxy."
"For better? Or for worse?"
"That's up to you, isn't it?" Alema said. "If there is too much light in the galaxy, perhaps there needs to be an equally powerful shadow. If there is darkness, you'll be the light."
"And your role in all this galaxy changing?" Anakin leaped over the security fence.
"Observer," Alema said with a sultry grin. "I find power very attractive after all."
"I have a girlfriend," Anakin replied dryly.
"It's nothing permanent," Alema said dismissively. "Besides, us Twi'lek make excellent concubines."
"Somehow I can't see you in the role of a concubine," Anakin said, shaking his head at her antics.
Alema spun so that she stood in front of Anakin, catching him by surprise. Placing a hand on his chest, she leaned forward and whispered into his ear. "Lover, then. I'm sure someone as strong as you can handle two."
"I can barely handle the one I have."
Alema grinned toothily and swirled behind Anakin, resting her chin on his shoulder and wrapping her arms around him. Lowering her voice, she tightened her arms in a brief hug, pressing herself to his back. "I can help you with her. I won't be a bother. I'm easy to handle. *Very*, easy to handle."
"Alema," Anakin croaked.
Alema released him and casually moved to one of the X-wings. "It's too bad you're with Tahiri though. She's definitely one of the possessive types. Think she felt that spike of lust I caused? Probably, no? Wonder what she'll do when she realizes it was me and not her that caused it?"
"Alema!" This time her name came out in a squeak.

"You see. Now I have to come with you or she'll fillet the both of us."
Alema gave Anakin one last wink before she climbed into the cockpit of the starfighter.
Anakin watched Alema for several long moments, before looking away and shaking his head. Realizing that people were beginning to wake, he hurriedly went about prepping his X-wing. Once in the cockpit and ready to go, he checked the comm system.
"Alema, you copy?"
"Loud and clear. So, where are we going? A moonlit beach? Some place with magnificent waterfalls with gems the size of fists? Or maybe the salt plains of..."
"We're going to an asteroid."
"An asteroid?"
"You can still stay behind if you want to. I just have a feeling that I have to be there, and soon."
"You never take me to any place nice. I hope Tahiri has better luck than I do."
Anakin rolled his eyes. "Well it's likely that Tahiri will either break up with me or kill me for this stunt. Maybe it's for the better."
"Really? The fairytale couple is having problems in paradise?"
Anakin said nothing as he started the X-wing's engines. "Don't want to talk about it."
"What do you want to talk about?"
"What do you think of the Force?"
"Oh, one of those questions."
The two X-wings passed through Borleias' upper atmosphere.
"The Force is just there. I never really paid attention to that light-dark thingy Master Skywalker preaches. If you're considered dark for using it to kill, why? It's no different than using a lightsaber to kill. We don't carry around lightsabers to make us look pretty. We use them to kill."
"To protect."
"And sometimes the only way to protect someone is to kill the threat. If...if I had used the Force to kill the voxyn, maybe I wouldn't have lost my sister. Would I have been dark for doing it? If so, then I could care less about Jedi ideals. If the dark side had helped me save my sister, when the light side would have me watch her die, then I would choose to be a dark Jedi in a heartbeat. To me, nothing is light or dark, but grey."
"The vision I had," Anakin began slowly, not sure why he trusted Alema with what he was about to tell him. "In the vision I had, someone told me I would become the next Sith Lord."
"You'd make a great one, you know."

"Not the sort of response I expected."
"What? You would. The only thing that's predictable about you is that you do the unpredictable. You instill loyalty and confidence in your followers. You even have the media and corrupt politicians on your side. I doubt that even Master Skywalker would be able to stop you if you choose that path."
"And if I went dark?" Anakin asked, already fearing Alema's response.
"Well, if you went dark. Hmm…Tahiri would already be your right hand, so I guess I would be your left."
"You say that like you know Tahiri would follow me."
"Pu-leaze, that girl worships the ground you walk on. You're her entire world. If you decide its night time, she'll kill the sun for you."
"You make it sound like she can't do anything without me," Anakin quipped, though he felt as if a heavy weight had been placed in his chest. For the first time, he truly realized that his actions would affect the future of two people he was close to.
"Oh, she'll be functional give or take a couple decades. She might even go dark anyways, since she doesn't have you to guide her. But I'm sure that the two of you won't be the first couple to go dark together, if you do. Is that why we're going on this little trip, to find answers?"
"Mostly," Anakin said faintly, inputting the hyperspace coordinates as his mind saw them.
"And the rest of the reason?"
"To get a different point of view of the universe." Anakin whispered. He pressed a button, and the stars around him elongated before his fighter jumped to hyperspace.
[T] [T]
"Antilles here," Wedge muttered groggily, wiping the sleep from his eyes.
"Sorry to wake you, sir. Just thought I'd inform you that Anakin Solo has carried out his part of your plan."
Wedge groaned. "I'm sorry. What plan?"
"Sir? He and Jedi Rar just took off in two X-wings saying that they were following your orders."
"I didn't give any orders." Wedge was rapidly waking up, as was his wife who had heard the tension in his voice.
"What's going on?" Iella said hoarsely.
"Apparently Anakin and Alema just stole two X-wings," Wedge said, flopping back onto the bed.
"What?"
"That's what I said," Wedge groaned. "Now I have to figure out how to tell Luke and the rest of his family."

[T] [T]

Borleias Occupation, Day 27, Late at Night

A blade of blue hissed through the air and severed a training dummy in two. Of course, the owner of the lightsaber responsible, wished that she had just sliced an entirely different dummy. A dummy who decided to go off on some quest and take with him, Alema of all people. She wasn't sure what made her angrier, his continued self-sacrificing attitude, or the fact that he ran off with that Twi'lek and left her behind. A Twi'lek who had made no secret of her desire of Anakin's person.

It was times like this when Tahiri wondered if Anakin still saw her as a little girl. Why else would he leave her behind and take *her*?

Snarling, Tahiri spun around, delivering a kick and a decapitating blow to a second target. She knew from what had leaked from Anakin's mental barriers that the visions had been haunting him. Knew that he was constantly looking for ways to improve himself so he could meet the expectations of the others. The combined pressure had been pushing him to a breaking point. Unfortunately for her, he was far too stubborn to really talk to anyone about the feelings he had been keeping bottled up. She had meant to broach upon the subject that day he had disappeared, but from his actions, it was clear that she should have done it earlier.

Another doubt struck her. What if he was finally rejecting who she had become? What if enough of the old Tahiri hadn't survived and he had grown to despise her new-self? Frustration and fear bubbled in her. She had been doing her best to conform herself to the expectations of the others around her. Tried to be the old Tahiri as much as she could be. But doing so only seemed to highlight the differences between them. What if it was too much for him?

He hadn't given any indication one way or another.

Maybe it was a combination of the two. She was too young and too Vong.

Tahiri let out a Tusken Raider cry and used the Force to enhance her speed, darting between six more targets. Three on her right fell apart with lightsaber wounds, the three on her left were punctured by the amphistaff she held in her off-hand. If Anakin was going on a journey to improve his skills, she would make sure that she could at least keep up with him when he returned. Taking Jaina's comment about combining Yuuzhan Vong and Jedi fighting styles to heart, Tahiri focused on the different weapons in her hands. One was cold to the touch, unfeeling, but with a blade of deadly warmth. The other was alive, wrapped

around her wrist and emitting a warmth that belied the icy effects of its toxins.
Tahiri slid her foot slowly across the ground, then, in a flair of motion, rapidly cut through the air around her. She bent her body backwards as she rotated beneath an invisible blade. Her dark green eyes spotted a drifting mote of dust, and she snapped her body in the opposite direction, cleaving the air with both of her weapons. Exhaling, she straightened. Taking a running start, she leaped into the air, her amphistaff lashing outwards and withdrawing as she landed. At the same time, the lightsaber that had been deactivated, hummed to life as her knee touched the ground. She froze where she was, panting softly as sweat beaded down the side of her face. Closing her eyes, she reached out to both her weapons.
She was Tahiri Kwaad. Jedi and Yuuzhan Vong. Light and dark.
If modeling herself on the old Tahiri wasn't working out. If he was still seeing her as a little girl that needed protecting. Well, she'd just have to redefine herself. Make herself seen the way she wanted to be seen, the opinions of others be damned.
"Have you tried fighting with that style, yet?" The voice of Mara Skywalker brought Tahiri out of her thoughts.
"Not yet, I'm still working out the kinks." Tahiri deactivated her lightsaber and stood.
"Since you're still up at this hour, I guess you can't sleep?"
"I guess I can't," Tahiri nodded, experimentally twirling the now hardened amphistaff with one hand.
"Well, one way to work out those kinks is a good sparring session," Mara said, regarding her nephew's girlfriend evenly. Anakin hadn't been the only one to notice the subtle changes in Tahiri's behavior. For Mara, it was as though Tahiri's mind was still trying to come to terms with the merger of its two personalities. Tahiri may have reconciled her human and Yuuzhan Vong parts of her, but her mind was far from stable.
Tahiri's eyes flickered to Mara's. "You can't sleep either?"
"He has us all worried," Mara shrugged, unclipping her own lightsaber.
Tahiri motioned to the Yuuzhan Vong weapon she was twirling. "It isn't a training staff. The poison is real."
"I'll just trust you to stop before the fangs puncture my skin," Mara replied.
"You sure you wanna do that?"
"Do what?"
"Trust me."
"Do I have a reason not to?"

Tahiri pulled back her hair to reveal the three scars across her forehead. "Apart from Anakin, Jaina, and maybe Zindra. There aren't many people who would. Especially since I started training and living with the Freed Ones."
"Those people don't know you like we do," Mara said calmly, evaluating Tahiri evenly "And I would trust you with my life."
Tahiri held Mara's gaze, then nodded slowly. "If you're sure."
"I am."
Tahiri activated her lightsaber.
"Luke and I have been talking about you," Mara squared off against the younger teen.
"What about?" Tahiri twirled both her weapons and looked for an opening.
"What would you say if I offered to take you as my apprentice?"
Tahiri edged forward, batting the tip of Mara's lightsaber with her weapons. "Not that I'm not honored, but why?"
"Honestly," Mara blocked several probing attacks. "You have a lot of potential. You have a lot of power. Both you and Anakin share those features. Unfocused, however, those traits can make you dangerous for both yourself and those around you."
"We've been looking out for each other," Tahiri cut low with her amphistaff and aimed her lightsaber at Mara's midsection.
"And where has that gotten you?" Mara said a bit more sternly than she meant. She parried the middle attack and deftly stepped over Tahiri's amphistaff. "Look, I'm not against your relationship with my nephew. In fact, I'm all for it. The thing is, the two of you are both reckless and impulsive. The last thing I want to do is attend either of your funerals. Having an extra someone look out for the two of you can't hurt, can it?"
"When he comes back, you'll take Anakin as your apprentice too?"
"If he wants me as his master, I will," Mara back-stepped and then launched an attack of her own. Tahiri's amphistaff slid along her side as Mara closed in. Only, Mara was forced back when Tahiri struck out with her lightsaber. "Nice, but if you do that, you leave yourself too open to projectile fire."
Tahiri bit her lower lip and rotated her lightsaber's angle experimentally. When she got the angle right, she glanced uncertainly at Mara. "Okay, but do I have to call you Master Skywalker?"
"Nah," Mara grinned. "That's my clueless husband. You can just call me Mara."
Tahiri returned Mara's smile, though a bit more shyly. "I look forward to learning from you, Mara."

Mara winked. "Right back at ya, Tahiri."
[T] Chapter End [T]
A\N: Next chapter wraps up Rebel Dream before being followed by an Anakin-centric intermission chapter, which is conceptually based off of the events of *Traitor*...
I know I said earlier that there'd be a two week break after the posting on the 19th, but I'm going to be changing things up a bit. Instead, next week's update will be a double-chapter update. After that, however, the following chapter won't be up until April 1st at the earliest. Unexpected RL issues have popped up, thanks in advance for your understanding.
Darksabre, you and your reviews rock as always. The scene with Kyp was added as my way of saying thanks for your continued support.
Wavelet (since your pm is disabled), thanks for the review. I've actually already included some otherverse EU characters in later chapters. Mostly one-off preludes that hint at the Legacy-verse, but some pertain to my version of the NJO plot. But I'm mostly focusing on NJO characters and plot for now.

ADA 14

Fourteen
[T] [T]
Deep-Space Rendezvous Point (Borleias Occupation, Day 29)
The Gallofee personnel transport *Jeolocas* dropped out of hyperspace not even close to any inhabited system or space station. The *Jeolocas* was one of many refugee ships fleeing the Yuuzhan Vong invasion. Having stopped by Borleias on its way out from Coruscant, it was supposed to have arrived at another safe haven. The jump had been deliberate, although not entirely expected by those onboard. The first thing the occupants in the bridge noticed, however, was a Yuuzhan Vong frigate analog. It's alien, red and black coral body loomed directly in front of them, its guns all trained on the doomed transport. *Jeolocas's* captain, a young man from Corellia, promptly lost all color in his face, and nearly lost control of his bowels, at the sight. It no longer mattered that he had been hand-picked by Talon Karde for the mission. That his lot in life was looking upward now that he had his boss's attention. His dreams of participating in epic battles and performing heroic deeds evaporated within the blink of an eye. Clutching his chest, he barely managed to let out a gasping croak. "We're dead."

The officer next to him, a human woman with dark hair tied back in a loose pony tail, merely smiled and patted his arm reassuringly. "Don't worry, this is a scheduled stop."
"What?" He blinked at her uncomprehendingly. Seeking the support of the other members of the bridge crew, he looked around and remembered that she had sent the other officers on various duties just before they dropped out of hyperspace. "You knew the Vong would be here?"
"You got it."
"Peace Brigade scum!" The captain drew his service blaster, something he had practiced to better emulate his heroes Han Solo and Wedge Antilles. He was quite good at it too. However, it appeared that the woman was better. Before his blaster had even cleared his holster, he found himself staring down the barrel of another.
"It doesn't matter who I am. Tell me, do you want to get out of this alive? To be able to go home and see your family again?"
He nodded faintly, wondering if he should still try use his blaster. Maybe he could distract her, catch her off guard. As if reading his mind, the woman reached over and removed the blaster herself. "If you're good, you'll get this back."
Working his dry mouth, he nodded again.
"Good, now go and hide. If you want to live, don't come out until I call for you."
Finding a new found appreciation for breathing, the captain scrambled for one of the maintenance hatches. He could only pray that he would be able to continue his appreciation for breathing for many more years to come.
[T] [T]
The boarding party sent from the frigate was led by a rather unpleasant Yuuzhan Vong who called himself Bastori Rak. Not that Jan Ors really cared. Her many years in Intelligence allowed her to quickly change character, going from a take-charge kidnapper to subservient pilot in a heartbeat. Apparently, the warrior was dumb enough to buy it. Even dumber still, to believe that a refugee transport would have a crateful of Jedi training material in its hold. She kept herself from shaking her head ruefully. If only all the Vong were this easy to fool, then the war would be over in a heartbeat.
Normally, being dragged out of hyperspace and boarded by Yuuzhan Vong would not be an experience she would willingly walk into. Yet, as part of the investigation into how the Vong were tracking the refugee convoys, it was necessary. She trusted her backup.
You can't go wrong with two Jedi Masters looking out for you.

Focusing on the warriors behind her, she motioned to one of the cargo bays. "The Jedi material is in here."
"Lead the way, human."
"As you command," Jan walked to a crate that was placed in plain sight. It was a larger crate, big enough to fit two people inside.
"Open it."
Jan inclined her head and inputted the code. It was not hard to make it look as if she was up to something.
A little fumbling there, a nervous glance at the commander.
As the warriors focused on her and the crate, two blades of light began slashing through their ranks. At the same time, droids emerged from all directions and filled the cargo hold with a sheet of blaster fire. By the time the pressure seals of the crate released, there was not much of Bastori Rak or his boarding party. Jan grabbed one of the juice boxes from within the crate and tossed it over to Kyle, before grabbing one for herself.
"All in a day's work, Kyle. Next time, you be the bait. You're much better at it than I am."
"Think Rogues Squadron will have any trouble with the frigate?" Jaden Korr asked, catching another juice box lobbed by Jan.
"I hope not," Jan muttered. "We're on a defenseless transport with shields that could stop an Ewok."
"Miss the *Raven's Claw* already?" Kyle and Jaden chuckled.
"Let me replace your lightsabers with a piece of durasteel and some tape and see how you like it."
"*This is Rogue Leader, we have a confirmed kill. Gambler you're free to dock."*
Kyle glanced at his comm. "Well, that didn't take long."
"They're Rogue Squadron," Jan rolled his eyes. "Unlike you boys, they can actually fly starfighters."
"Hey, we can fly starfighters too." Kyle protested.
"Without crashing them, or needing extensive repairs after every mission."
"The *Far Wanderer* is in perfectly good shape," Jaden said. "Master Katarn and I have racked up plenty of kills."
"Rogue Squadron does it all without using the Force," Jan said airily.
"Master, make her stop," Jaden mock whined. "My Headhunter and I are starting to feel insignificant to those kids flying about in the more advanced starfighters."
The *Jeolocas* shook lightly, signaling the docking of Lando's ship and the science team led by Danni Quee.

"Break time's over," Kyle said lightly. "Let's see if we can't figure out how the Vong are tracking these ships."
"I still vote that it's the refugees who are selling each other out," Jaden quipped.
"Probably," Jan said. "They're willing to sell out Jed to save their own skins. I can't see why it'd be any different for each other."
As Danni and Lando appeared in the narrow hallway leading to the cargo bay carrying cases of equipment, Kyle shrugged. "Probably, but at least this time we'll know for sure."
"By the way, whatever happened to the captain of this ship?" Jaden spoke up.
"Oh, I forgot about him." Jan finished off her juice box and glanced back towards the bridge. "I'll let him hide out for a couple more minutes. Then get him to come out when we leave. He was too tense anyways. He could use the break."
[T] [T]
Borleias Occupation, Day 30
"Scans of the region suggest that this area, at the base of this mountain, is being used as a staging ground by both the surviving and newly arriving Yuuzhan Vong forces." Tycho motioned to the image being projected by the holoprojector. The holo-display depicted a geometric grid with representations of the lush jungle and the aforementioned mountain in the center. "Normally, we would wait for them to come to us, but they are currently holding one of our people prisoner. The fact that the prisoner is alive has been confirmed by intelligence we've managed to gather."
"The mountain itself is a dormant volcano, so it has an extensive network of lava tubes that run several kilometers in multiple directions," Iella took over. "At the moment, the Yuuzhan Vong encamped there can use these tunnels to appear in a wide variety of locations. What we'll do is have Twin Suns squadron carry out several bombing runs to close off these tunnels. We'll leave one or two open so we can predict and guide their movements."
Iella pressed a button on the projector and the image zoomed in. "We anticipate anywhere between fifty to three hundred warriors present at this location. The troop transport we let land was tracked to a lake two klicks south of here. So they likely have a forward outpost at the landing site, manned by another fifty warriors."
"Defenses?" Jag asked.
"At most, they will have a flight or two of coralskippers hidden by the jungle foliage. Also expect a couple of their assault beasts."
"*Rakamat,"* Taan spoke up, sitting behind Tahiri and Mara.

"Yes," Iella inclined her head towards the Freed One. "Rakamats. Similar to the one Lando and the team of engineers killed at when the New Republic forces first took this base."
Lando groaned. The beast in question had been nearly invincible with its void defenses and plasma turrets. He had only gotten lucky enough to bump into a team of engineers who had a large cache of explosives with them. Using the explosives as an improvised mine, Lando had blown out the massive beasts' insides from below. "Great, I guess I'll be digging more holes then."
"The volcano and lake camps may also have some anti-air defenses, but we won't know for sure until the attack begins." Iella continued. "Though the goal of this mission is to rescue the prisoner. The primary objective will be to scatter the Vong in these areas so they will be less organized and effective in their attacks on this base. Any more questions?"
When none were asked, Tycho resumed the briefing. "We will be opening our attack on the southern landing site first. While our forces are bombarding the landing strip, a small strike force led by Jedi Master Mara Jade-Skywalker and Jedi Tahiri Kwaad, will infiltrate the mountain base and free the captive. Once we receive a signal from them, Twin Suns will begin their bombing runs and a larger force led by Jedi Masters Horn and Luke Skywalker will begin the direct assault on the volcano base. There will be no pursuit of any fleeing Yuuzhan Vong force. We want the survivors of our attack to continue their contact with the forces that have taken Pyria VI."
"Okay then," Wedge clapped his hands. "You all have your assignments. May the Force be with you."
[T] [T]
Crouching low, Tahiri, Mara, and the six other Freed Ones hid in the treetops of the lush jungle growth. An entanglement of thick vines and roots aided their passage from treetop to treetop, keeping them out of sight of the Yuuzhan Vong warriors rushing to aid the landing site that was under heavy attack from the New Republic forces.
The tall trees and thick foliage continued all the way up the side of the dormant volcano, stopping just short of the rim. The mouth of the volcano was fairly wide; wide enough to land a full squadron of fighters inside. If one looked down into the crater of the volcano, they would see the actual Yuuzhan Vong base. Inside, warriors trained in the open, atop the glassy rock surface, and others moved in and out a single cave opening that led to the wider array of magma tubes. A single *rakamat* could be seen off to the side, being tended by several Shamed Ones and shapers.

It was a cloudy day, which made the wet heat of Borleias all the worse. The vonduun crab armor appeared to be just as uncomfortable for the warriors in such heat, as many had gone without.
Neither Mara nor Tahiri had that luxury. Dressed in full Yuuzhan Vong armor and wearing a prototype ooglith masquer that mimicked the face of a Yuuzhan Vong warrior, designed by Danni Quee and Wraith Squadron, both Mara and Tahiri were the picture bored and aggravated Yuuzhan Vong warriors. Four of the Freed Ones were clad similarly, posing as low ranking warriors, while the remaining two retained their Shamed One roles.
When the last patrol bypassed their position, the team skillfully descended to the forest floor. Quickly assuming their roles, they walked straight over the rim of the volcano and onto a winding, narrow, side-path. They had just started their trek into the crater, when two warriors who had been relaxing quickly reached for their amphistaffs and barred the way.
Tahiri stepped forward, glaring. "*Guvvuk!" Move.*
The warrior motioned to the Yuuzhan Vong following Tahiri and Mara. "*Puul! Viccat yam sha brenzlit tur doa kanabar belel tui guvvu?" No! You dare command me to move for these timid workers?*
"*Yadag dakl, ignot!"* Tahiri snarled, whipping her amphistaff out so fast that the warrior blocking their way stumbled backwards in surprise. Seeing this Tahiri tilted her chin up and scoffed. "*Fasii zidal Kraal'bruzi. Zahl Guvvuk!" As expected of a weakling of Domain Kraal. Now move!*
The warrior's face purpled and he stepped forward. "*Dwu'vel yam nikk pryozz?" Do you know who I am?*
Tahiri leaned forward, glowering. She stretched out the next few words as if talking to a dim-witted child. "*Ka-ne a bar."*
Before the warrior could react, she promptly lashed her amphistaff around his ankles and sent him flying off the narrow passage way. His partner regarded Tahiri with new respect and clasped his hand over his chest.
"*Belek tiu*."
Tahiri made a dismissing motion, and the guard stepped aside. There were no further checkpoints down the winding path around the rim of the volcano, which was fortunate.
"What was that all about?" Mara murmured out of the side of her mouth.
"He didn't want to move out of the way," Tahiri shrugged.
"I got that much."
"It didn't help that our subordinates are low-level warriors and Shamed Ones and that we are women. The rank of those following the one in

charge reflects on the status of the group leader. He thought we were only good enough to escort workers, so we were obligated to pay him respect. Well, that and he was part of Domain Kraal, the original defenders. He was kind of sore about that."
"Well, at least the other one let us go."
"He was probably fed up with the guy I threw over the side," Tahiri said absently.
The two then fell silent as they reached the bottom of the crater. Several warriors briefly stopped their sparring to glance at their arrival, but no one moved to challenge them. The other occupants in the crater, namely the Shamed Ones attending the Vong siege beast, quickly averted their eyes upon seeing the group.
"Tahiri," Mara whispered tersely, seeing recognition appear in the eyes of those Shamed Ones. It was clear that they recognized Taan or one of the others with them.
Tahiri motioned for Taan and one of the others posing as a Shamed One to join them. After a string of instructions, Tahiri let out an audible snarl, as if Taan had displeased her, and backhanded Taan. The Freed One knew how to sell the blow pretty well. Despite the fact that Tahiri's hand only just grazed her cheek, Taan crumpled to the ground. She wobbled back to her feet and bowed her head lowly, before she and the other Freed One staggered off towards the *rakamat* amidst the laughter of some of the nearby warriors.
"They'll take care of it," Tahiri murmured faintly. She was scanning the jagged bottom of the crater for her goal. An orbital picture of the area had revealed that Shaeri was being held in a cage outside. Hopefully the Yuuzhan Vong hadn't moved her.
Fortunately Tahiri spotted the cage, as well as a limp form trapped within. Unfortunately, a guttural Yuuzhan Vong voice barked out a command before Tahiri could do anything about it. Turning, Tahiri saw the other warriors move away as a heavy scarred warrior stormed in her direction yelling loudly in Yuuzhan Vong.
"Ooops," Tahiri muttered as the massive warrior snarled at her from a distance. He was purposely stalking towards both her and Mara, a *tsaisi* gripped firmly in his hand.
"Ooops?"
"Remember the guy I threw off the ledge?"
Mara did a double take on the warrior. Though it was hard to tell, there was a similarity in the slope of the warrior's head. "Let me guess, his dad?"
"The current ground commander of what's left of Domain Kraal," Tahiri nodded faintly. She subtly motioned to the rest of the Freed Ones to go

to the cage where Shaeri was being held. Hopefully they could use this distraction to their advantage.
The large warrior stopped in front of Tahiri and glared down at her. Sharp words in Yuuzhan Vong were exchanged by both, with Mara following the conversation back and forth and not understanding a thing. She did understand, however, the body language of the other warriors as they formed a loose circle around them.
"*Nikk pryozz Tahiri Kwaad."* Tahiri snarled, uncurling her amphistaff. *"Kash tchrok yam do!"*
Mara mentally face-palmed as Tahiri and the large warrior began to duel. Not for the first time she wondered if accepting Tahiri as an apprentice would be good for her. When Mara had broached the subject with her husband, he had been skeptical about whether she would be able to both take care of Ben *and* Tahiri and Anakin. Learning of her idea, Corran Horn had sympathetically patted her on the back and said 'Better you than me.' Kyp Durron even had the nerve to send her a condolence card. Mara, however, had definitely wanted to see what Tahiri was made of. Wanted to see what attracted her nephew to the younger teen.
In the past few days since Tahiri had accepted the apprenticeship, Mara couldn't help but be impressed. Even now as she watched as Tahiri appeared to be overpowered by the Vong commander's aggressive fighting style, she knew that Tahiri wouldn't need her help. The young blonde was an earnest learner. Who, at the core of everything, just wanted acceptance, a place to belong.
Out of the corner of her eyes, Mara saw the Freed Ones finish with the liberation of their compatriot. Subtly signaling Tahiri that the job was done, Mara also clicked the comlink hidden in her vonduum armor to alert the rest of the New Republic forces. In the meantime, the young teen responded by unexpectedly ramping up her attack on the massive warrior. Sliding under an over-aggressive swing, Tahiri's amphistaff shattered the shin-bone of the warrior. Before the warrior could recover, Tahiri drove the sharpened tip of the Yuuzhan Vong weapon through the warrior's opposite ankle, hobbling him.
Then, startling every single warrior in the crater, Tahiri activated her lightsaber and lopped off the warrior's head. She even managed to take out several of the closer warriors before they shook themselves from their stupor.
Alarmed cries of '*Jeedai'* filled the crater; but were quickly drowned out only by a sudden barrage of blaster fire. A battalion of Lando's droids took aim over the rim of the volcano, dropping the unarmored warriors

with deadly efficiency. Several troop transports also hovered above, heavy repeaters throwing super-heated metal down at the base camp. The roar of the *rakamat* momentarily heartened the frantic Yuuzhan Vong force. But only moments later, the massive creature was on a rampage, trampling the warriors who had formed up around it for cover. Taan and some of the Freed Ones manned the reins of the beast, while two of the Shamed Ones who had been caring for it fired off the plasma cannons. Though it was clear neither gunner had a clue about how to aim or work the weapons, they fired enough times that some of their shots got lucky.

In the chaos, Mara, Tahiri, and the rest of the Freed Ones fought their way over to the hulking beast. They clambered up onto its back and secured an unconscious Shaeri within a flesh-like pod. Meanwhile, the Yuuzhan Vong began firing razor and blast bugs at the *rakamat.* Which it clearly didn't appreciate. It roared once more, and the few warriors who had been brave enough to stay and fight, were promptly crushed to death.

Several of the warriors made it to the four coralskippers parked on the opposite side of the crater. As the starfighters powered up, a hail of lasers from the attacking force was absorbed by the fighters' void defenses. Tahiri took command of one of the plasma cannons, swiveled around, and blasted one of the coralskippers trying to take off. It fell sideways, landing on another coralskipper. The explosion caused a chain reaction that buffeted a third into the crater wall. Meanwhile the fourth fighter fell to plasma fire by Mara's plasma cannon. By the time the guns stopped firing, all four fighters had been reduced to smoldering wrecks of coral.

Needless to say, the battle was over swiftly, with most of the other warriors retreating into the network of lava tubes that stretched out from the volcano.

With the combat over, a bemused Luke Skywalker and Corran Horn arrived at the bottom of the crater and stared up at the huffing Vong siege beast with a great amount of nervousness. Its plasma cannons were still dripping with molten liquid, and a great amount of spittle flew through the air as it snorted at the approach of the two Jedi. With enough weaponry to annihilate a small army and take out a squadron of starfighters, both masters had a good reason to be anxious.

Then, from above, the petite form of Tahiri appeared. She had removed the ooglith masquer prototype and was now waving happily back down at them. "Master Skywalker, Master Horn, can we keep him?"

[T] [T]

Borleias Occupation, Day 33

The victory over the Yuuzhan Vong fleet and the recovery of Shaeri had more or less sealed the deal for many of the undecided Shamed Ones. In a ritual devised by Tahiri, Danni, and Sharr Latt; two dozen Shamed Ones were freed from their shame and joined the ranks of Taan and the original half-dozen Freed Ones. Now the training sessions filled a good corner of the landing field outside the biotics facility, in full view of any Yuuzhan Vong scouts hiding in the forest.

Jaina, in her guise as Yun-Harla, strode between the ranks of the Freed Ones. A full week of non-stop training, in combat and in intelligence gathering, had really given the former Shamed caste a new purpose in life. They had definitely come a long way. Even if some of the newer Freed Ones had once been warriors in a previous life, decades of servitude had left their combat skills more than a little rusty. But once they picked up an amphistaff again and completed a few basic practice moves, the rest seemed to come a bit easier for them. They became mentors to the other Freed Ones, showing none of the distain or arrogance a warrior might have shown when asked to teach someone of a lesser skill level. In turn, some of the others coached these former warriors on their Basic and intelligence gathering skills. Being Shamed had made all of them equal. Being Freed made all of their wills unwavering. They were now on display for her goddess's approval, more propaganda, but also a confirmation of sorts for the Freed Ones. The original six that had followed Taan were now able to speak broken sentences of Basic, enough to get their meaning across. The collapse of the language barrier had also been instrumental in getting some of the New Republic soldiers to trust them. It was now not uncommon to see several soldiers during meal time having awkward but enlightening conversations with their Yuuzhan Vong allies. Even more surprising was how some of the original six were now instructing these other soldiers on Yuuzhan Vong fighting styles.

There were still New Republic soldiers who disapproved, of course, and their number remained sizable. Just as there were moments of friendship, it was just as common to see harsh words, or even food thrown, at the Freed Ones who ate in the mess hall. More than once, a soldier had to be disciplined for striking or physically intimidating one of the Freed Ones. Yet, Taan and several of the others continued to eat in the mess-hall. When asked why they put up with the abuse, Taan pointed to the other soldiers eating with the Freed Ones.

"Ignorance and fear only exist if allowed to exist," Taan had said through Tahiri. "For every one that fears us, there is another who

desires to learn. If no opportunity to learn exists, they too will begin to fear what they do not know."
Looking on from the sidelines was Wedge, Tycho, Face, and Mara. All equally impressed, and equally surprised, as to how well Anakin and Tahiri's little side project was working out.
The soft bellowing of the captured *rakamat*, stabled next to the biotics facility, just went to show *how* successful the project was working out. Han, upon seeing the creature first hand, had compared the *rakamat* to a Vong hybrid of an adolescent krayt dragon mixed with a mutated rancor and a giant reek. Add void defenses and plasma cannons, and it was easy to see why everyone at the New Republic base was glad that this particular *rakamat* was now on their side.
"I think they're ready for the mission to Coruscant," Face muttered, watching the group of Freed Ones run through several exercises. "At least the original group is."
"We'll take at least another week or so for planning the mission, so more will be ready by the time we're ready to leave," Mara nodded.
"You're coming too?" Face glanced sidelong at the red-headed Jedi.
"I know Tahiri isn't just going to abandon the Freed Ones, and she's my apprentice," Mara said. "Luke can take care of Ben until Booster arrives to take all the kids to the Maw."
"So we have you, Master Katarn, and Master Korr coming with us, plus the blond squirt. For once I actually have a good feeling about this impossible-to-accomplish mission," Face said jovially. "What can go wrong with four Jedi coming along?"
"I'll start making a list," Mara replied sardonically. "Wedge, have we had any luck with the refugee issue?"
"No. Danni said that the last ship was not tracked gravimetrically. At the moment, we're leaning towards refugees selling each other out. There's not much we can do about that."
"On the bright side, that ship full of HoloNet reporters beat a hasty retreat after learning that Anakin was no longer here," Tycho said, motioning to the sky.
"Thank the Force for small mercies," Mara agreed. "If only that thick-headed nephew of mine hadn't inherited his hero-complex from both his mother and father."
"Do you know if he's okay?" Wedge asked.
"The brat's shielding himself from me," Mara scowled, shaking her head. "And from the way Tahiri beat up the sparring dummies earlier, he's doing the same to her."

"It's got to be rough on that kid," Face said. "A war time romance with one of the galaxy's biggest heroes. I mean, she's only what, fourteen, fifteen? That's a lot of pressure on someone so young."
"Didn't you already have a dozen holovids when you were that age?" Wedge pointed out. "And ten times that many fangirls at your beck and call?"
"I wasn't too attached to any of those girls. Rather, I was more afraid of them now that I think about it. Spent most of my time trying to run away."
"Afraid?" Tycho raised an eyebrow.
"I still haven't figured out which is scarier; a hoard of snarling Yuuzhan Vong warriors wanting to kill you, or an army of screaming fangirls trying to devour you." Face deadpanned. "Tahiri's already been through more than I have and she seems to be keeping it together pretty well. Especially for someone who has no family and probably no credits in her bank account. Which reminds me. I've been meaning to ask, does the Order pay their Jedi?"
Mara looked startled at the random question and turned to the Wraith. "What?"
"Pay, as in a form of currency to compensate one for their services? The New Republic pays their soldiers, and hazardous duty bonuses when the situation calls for it. The Jedi aren't a part of the government so they don't get a portion of the taxes its citizens pay. Nor do I ever remember the government actually paying the Order for their services."
"The Jedi don't really receive any pay," Mara shook her head. "We're supposed to be keepers of the peace, not mercenaries."
"Then are all of you are individually wealthy already? Tahiri doesn't have a family, so how does she pay for food and clothes and the like?"
"What brought this on?" Mara cocked her head.
"Just watching some of the HoloNet reports," Face motioned to where Tahiri was leading an exercise. "That Ganner Rhysode is a fairly popular correspondent with several of the news channels. He's pretty photogenic, and he's not that bad in the acting department either. He's been continuing to tell the galaxy about the Jedi Order. Everything from the hierarchy to your choice in clothing."
"Really?" Mara said in disbelief. Even Wedge and Tycho seemed mildly interested in the conversation.
"Yup," Face said casually. "I thought you upper-ranking Jedi knew about it already. For the past couple of weeks, he's been continuing Anakin's plan of making the Jedi less of the mysterious boogie-men

that the galaxy fears. Or at least I assume it's Anakin's plan, after those interviews he gave."
"Interview*s*?"
"He was the one giving the interviews before Ganner took over," Face said, tilting his head. "Don't tell me none of the Order was aware of this? It's all the rage on the HoloNet at the moment."
"So it appears," Mara grumbled. "Both Ganner and Alema were in on Anakin's plan during his trial on Hapes, but he didn't tell anyone else until much later. I don't see any reason why things would be any different now."
Face motioned back to the biotics facility. "Jedi Rhysode's next broadcast is scheduled for tomorrow. You can watch it if you want."
"You know, I find it very ironic." Tycho watched as several of the New Republic soldiers integrate their training with the Freed Ones. "That Anakin is doing for the Jedi, what he and Tahiri have done for those Freed Ones. The Jedi Order is feared outside those who don't know them. He's doing his best to change that. The Vong are feared by pretty much everyone, yet he and Tahiri have gotten our people to work alongside a bunch of them."
"And he's only seventeen, and she fifteen," Mara commented. "The Force only knows what they'll accomplish when they grow older."
[T] [T]
Borleias Occupation, Day 34
"This is Pal'iva Konat with the Galactic Star's segment of 'Jedi: Demon or Protector.' Filling in for Anakin Solo and joining us once again is representative of the Jedi Order, Ganner Rhysode, broadcasting from the frontlines. Also joining us today is Peace Brigade Commander General Jartre Rinmek, from the capital planet of Ylesia, and recently promoted Captain Themion from the Home Defense Forces of Eriadu. Thank you all for taking time out of your busy schedules to join us."
Rhysode: "Not a problem."
Themion: "I still don't see why we need to hear any of the Jedi's lies."
Rinmek: "No matter, Captain Themion, the people of this galaxy are smart enough not to fall for them. It is good to be here, Ms. Konat."
Konat: "As usual for our alternating format, today I'll be asking three questions. At the end of the debate, our listeners and viewers will be allowed to voice their opinions: are the Jedi demons or protectors? So, to start things off; for the first question: It is widely thought throughout the galaxy that the Jedi care more for their own than for the fate of the galaxy. How is this true or not true?"
Themion: "Of course it's true. If given the option, the Jedi would sooner give up an entire inhabited world than turn themselves over to

the Yuuzhan Vong. We need only look at the many planets who now suffer because of the selfishness of the Jedi."
Rinmek: "It is why organizations such as the Peace Brigade exist. The entire war is the fault of the Jedi. We have heard from the leaders of the Yuuzhan Vong that all offensives would stop if the Jedi would only surrender themselves. The death, the suffering, all of it can be avoided. What is the life of a dozen or so individuals compared with the trillions who die because of their stubbornness? If the Jedi truly care about the people of this galaxy, they would all give themselves up. Because they don't, it is up to us responsible citizens to ensure that these selfish people are held accountable for their inaction."
Konat: "Well, those are some pretty strong views. Jedi Rhysode, your response to their charges."
Rhysode: "First off, I'd like to acknowledge that Captain Themion and the Commander General are admirable in their care for the people of the galaxy, though their views are based on slightly inaccurate information. In my last interview, I listed the names of the Jedi who fell protecting the inhabited worlds. Some of these individuals even turned themselves over to the Yuuzhan Vong, as my two fellow debaters suggested they do. What occurred after their surrender was the complete enslavement and destruction of the world at the hands of the Yuuzhan Vong fleet. In addition to these brave people who died trying to protect entire worlds by themselves, the Vong have also targeted Jedi children. Tell me, would you hand over your own child just so you could live another day? Jedi from the ages of eight to eighteen have been hunted down and slain during the course of this war. At least the Empire had the decency to indoctrinate captured Jedi children. We have endured all this, yet even now the Jedi are fighting to protect the refugee convoys out of Coruscant."
Konat: "Thank you. Now, for question two: Jedi Rhysode has mentioned that Jedi children have been killed in the war. It has even been suggested that the Peace Brigade organization would tear apart entire families of Jedi in an effort to appease the Yuuzhan Vong. My question, in the name of protecting the people of the galaxy, is it going too far to involve and kill Jedi children?"
Rinmek: "This is a war. Jedi inaction allowed their deaths, so they must be brought to justice. Why show even the children of the Jedi mercy when the children on Yuuzhan Vong occupied worlds lay cold and dead? Think of the many who died on Coruscant. While Jedi children such as Ben Skywalker received a full military escort to safety. Billions upon billions of this galaxy's children suffered the bombs and

darkness brought on by the Jedi. We want peace, the Jedi want war. The children of Jedi are still Jedi. It is as simple as that."
Rhysode: "Wait, wait, wait. Let's get this straight! Children of Jedi are children, nothing more. Just as a six year old Twi'lek or Rodian is nothing more than a six year old child. What you're saying, Commander General, is that the Peace Brigade is willing to murder children in cold blood all because of what they might become? That because a race of aliens has killed trillions of children, it's alright to kill a few more? Jedi have died defending the children of others, the Peace Brigade want to kill the children of others. For me, at least, it's easy to see which one of us is the demon."
Konat: "We're almost out of time here, so let's go on to the final question: In as few words as possible, is the Yuuzhan Vong occupation of this galaxy a good or bad thing and why?"
Themion: "Most definitely a good thing. This galaxy needs to be swept clean of the filth and corruption that has stained the highest levels of the government. The old needs to be swept aside for the new. We've had the Empire, we've had the New Republic, but life has hardly improved either way. Now, we have a chance for something better."
Rinmek: "I agree with Captain Themion. Though many have died in this revolution, the Yuuzhan Vong are honorable, just leaders. Only those afraid of change would resist what they stand for, what they have to offer us."
Rhysode: "You know, Ms. Konat, you really need to get less psychopaths on this show. Who wouldn't be afraid of the change the Yuuzhan Vong is bringing? Everywhere they go, people die. For those still oohing and ahhing over the sweet words of the other two, people dying is a bad thing. The sad part is, it's the Yuuzhan Vong warrior and priest caste that are screwing up their society. Now, if their Shamed Ones were in control, that's their slave class by the way, I'm pretty sure we could have actually become friends. But, as things stand, their occupation of this galaxy is definitely a very bad."
Konat: "Thank you all once again. Remember, all of you watching and listening out there, now's your time to vote using the instant vote touch panel. After listening to the three of our fine presenters, are the Jedi demons or protectors of this galaxy? Aaaaand we have the results. Out of the five point three billion beings who've voted, of those who said that the Jedi were protectors of the galaxy, a solid twenty percent of you approve of the Jedi under its current leader, Luke Skywalker. But sixty-eight percent of you would back the Jedi only if they chose a new leader. While these numbers seem high, keep in mind viewers and listeners, fifty-one percent of you would rather side with the Peace

Brigade. Well, that's all the time we have. This is Pal'iva Konat with the Galactic Star, wishing you another day of safety and happiness."
[T][T]
Ganner Rhysode sagged in his quarters as the broadcast ended. He was still, however, connected with the Galactic Star HoloNet channel.
"So, Ms. Konat, how'd I do?"
"Like you need me to boost your ego any further, Mr. Rhysode." The Twi'lek newscaster grinned. *"You and Anakin Solo have done wonders for my career. I mean, both of you are good looking and definitely know how to charm a crowd. You're both smart too, that's always a plus."*
"Please, haven't I already told you to just call me Ganner?"
"If this were a private line I would, Mr. Rhysode. But as popular as I am with the bosses right now, they'd fire me if our relationship went beyond a professional one."
"I could always tell them I'd only do interviews and talk shows if you're the host."
There was a knock on the doorframe to his room. Ganner, sensing the people behind him, suddenly froze. "Oh, ummm…listen, Ms. Konat. I'll have to get back to you later. Urgent Jedi business and all."
"Of course. Stay safe out there, Mr. Rhysode."
Sheepishly, Ganner ended the communications and turned around to face his audience. "Hi, Masters Skywalker, Skywalker, Horn, Durron, and not-Masters Antilles and Loran."
"Is that all you have to say?" Mara arched an eyebrow.
"Anakin made me do it?"
"Drop the question mark," Mara said dryly.
"But he really did," Ganner stammered, fishing for a datapad that he had stored under his pillow. "The night before he left, I found this shoved under my door."
Mara took the datapad and read it out loud. "'Ganner, since you had so much fun with the holocams back on Hapes, how would you like to become even more famous? Attached is the HoloNet address to a reporter from the Galactic Star, keep doing what you were doing on Hapes and be yourself. Remember, you're trying to make friends and not annoy a whole galaxy. Sorry, -A.S.'"
"It does sound like something Anakin would do," Kyp chuckled. "Even if he's worrying about his own Force visions, he still makes sure his plans are carried out."
"Tahiri's going to kill him when she learns that he left a message for Ganner and not for her," Mara sighed.
"You could, not, tell her," Ganner said hopefully.

"Then she'll kill you too," Corran added deadpan.
"Tell her! Better him than me."
"How quickly your loyalties change."
"Hey, I have another interview tomorrow. I can't have her ruining my stunning good lucks."
"She wouldn't touch your face," Mara said. "She'll just make sure there won't be any Little Rhysodes running around."
Ganner reflexively protected himself. "And Anakin wants her to be his girlfriend?"
"More seriously," Luke stepped forward. "How long have you been doing this?"
Ganner sobered. "This was my seventh broadcast. From what I learned from Pal'iva, Anakin's done another eight. Anakin felt that this was the best way to shed the secrecy that surrounds us Jedi."
"But to give away Order secrets…" Corran began.
"It's not like we tell the galaxy how to build a lightsaber, kill a Jedi, or negate the Force. We just tell them little things. Things about the lives of our dead friends, the planets we've visited, the cultures we've encountered. Sometimes we tell them about the adventures from the past that we've learned from Tionne. Anything to make the Jedi less mysterious and more personable. You heard today's poll, we have nearly fifty-percent approval. When Anakin started off, less than twenty percent even sided with the Jedi."
"You have to admit, Luke, he has a point," Wedge pointed out. "Almost everything I know about Jedi came from both you and Corran. If it wasn't for the two of you, my only point of reference would be the holovids. You may be an expert Jedi, but you've been losing at the game of politics since the war started."
"You think I should let these HoloNet sessions continue?"
"Honestly, unless Ganner screws up royally, they can't hurt," Kyp said. "The biggest backlash we can expect is that some Yuuzhan Vong goes on a rampage and starts blowing up Galactic Star HoloNet buoys everywhere."
"Think of Ganner as the Jedi Press Secretary or Jedi Public Relations Manager," Wedge said in agreement. "You're the Grandmaster. You can make those ranks, can't you?"
"It *will* make Jedi missions much easier if we don't have to worry about being stabbed in the back," Corran said.
Luke rubbed tiredly at his face, then nodded wearily. "Okay, then. But do you think you can give us an advance warning about what you're going to say? Maybe we can improve on this plan of Anakin's. Wedge,

can you can lend us a couple of your Intelligence experts to help us out?"
"Until he leaves, you can work with Face on upping your propaganda against the Peace Brigade and likeminded individuals. Iella would also be a good pick; she specializes in counter-intelligence and psychological warfare."
"Thank you. Corran, do you think you can work with them as well?"
"I will, Master Skywalker."
Luke managed a faint smile. "I wish Anakin would work these plans out with us ahead of time."
"So, Rhysode," Mara said. "Can we expect any more surprises from my nephew?"
"If he has any more plans, he didn't share them with me.'
[T] [T]
There were the Freed Ones of Yun-Shuno, and there was Kadat, acolyte of the deity Yun-Ne'Shel and follower of the Cult of Life. In his eyes, Anakin Solo was Yun-Ne'Shel's avatar, placed in the galaxy to bring true life back to the Yuuzhan Vong. Having served in the shaper compound for much his life, he had learned how the shapers twisted and created life. It was there that he first met a member of the Cult of Life and attended a prayer session.
Those in the Cult of Life believed that there was another way to live besides the endless wars manufactured by the warrior and priest castes; that Yun-Ne'Shel had gave the Yuuzhan Vong the gift to shape life for reasons other than death. The suffering they endure as Shamed Ones was merely a test by the gods. A new life awaited them if they stayed faithful to Yun-Ne'Shel. Anakin Solo, as the hero of the Jedi Order, was Yun-Ne'Shel's avatar. He would return the True Way to its rightful path, and all those who believed would be rewarded.
Unlike the more diverse array of followers held by Yun-Shuno, the followers of Yun-Ne'Shel were almost entirely composed of ex-shapers or those who had served the shapers. The followers of Yun-Shuno were more militant. The followers of Yun-Ne'Shel patient. At the Yuuzhan Vong base on Borleias, there had been one other member of the Cult of Life; a shaper in a previous life, before his implants had fallen away, Wryadra. Both Kadat and Wryadra had been given a salvaged section of the old Yuuzhan Vong base to work.
Occasionally the Jedi Danni Quee, would stop by and provide more material to shape with, or to learn how they shaped. The project assigned to them by Anakin Solo was such that, should any of the other priests, shapers, or warriors see what they were creating, it would instantly be called the ultimate blasphemy. Just as Yun-Ne'Shel

was a melding of two halves of life, so too was their project. Anakin had told them that this was a personal request, that he was simply curious to see if it could be done. But both Kadat and Wryadra were more than happy to go along with his plan. They took it as a challenge from their gods and were determined to see it succeed.
In between other assignments, but Kadat and Wryadra would return to their grotto and shape what Anakin had requested of them. It was a ship of Yuuzhan Vong origin, grown from yorik coral seeds from Borleias' shaper's damutek. Yet it also contained the metal components of a New Republic vessel. At the moment, it was still in its infancy. The metal constructs had slowed its growth considerably. But, to the surprise of both members of the Cult of Life, the yorik coral was actually connecting itself to the open-wire interfaces that Anakin had constructed. Apart from Danni, only one other knew of this particular project. A man named Lando Calrissian. He supplied and helped create many of the metal parts of the vessel, and had been by constantly since Anakin Solo had gone off on his sacred quest.
As both Kadat and Wryadra coaxed the growing dovin basal to surround another metal component, Lando reached over and attached a bundle of interconnected tubes.
"There. That completes the feeders."
Wryadra, who was fluent in Basic, inclined his head. "If the dovin basal desires to grow around that device, the affects should be interesting indeed."
It was an idea of Anakin's, based off the concept of a combustion engine. Anakin had decided to hook up a nutrient feeder to the dovin basal to alter the emissions it gave off. On most Yuuzhan Vong ships, a dovin basal was cared for by a Shamed One, given just enough food to remain healthy. After learning more about the dovin basal from Danni, Kadat, and Wryadra, Anakin experimented and discovered that the mood of the dovin basal greatly affected its output. Since the dovin basal was a non-sentient living creature, much like a tree, the type of food it received, and the quality of it, altered its appearance and emissions. Different foods at different amounts could literally change the gravimetric signature it produced. In a sense, the ship now being shaped by Anakin's two followers, and Danni and Lando, if successful, would be able to mimic the gravimetric emissions of other ships, or even produce no gravimetric profile at all.
"You know," Lando groaned as he slid out from under the feeding device. "If this is that kid's idea of a present. He's going to start making us regular guys feel really inferior."

"But he is more than a 'regular guy,'" Wryadra said, his accented Basic slow and melodious, as if he was putting extra emphasis on the soft-sounding vowels. "He is an avatar of the goddess Yun-Ne'Shel. His intended is the avatar for her grace Yun-Shuno. Only a ship such as this would be a fitting present for Yun-Shuno. The finest in the shaping of life and merging of worlds."
"You guys really believe that Anakin's some mouthpiece of the gods?" Lando brushed off the grease from his hands.
"You have seen the feats he has accomplished. How could he have accomplished them if not for the grace of our gods? Why would so many look to him if they did not believe he maintained divine favor?" Wrydra said.
"You have a point there," Lando grumbled. "I wish he'd use some of that godly power to speed up the growth of this thing. At the rate it's growing, it probably won't be done for at least another year."
"Two would be a better estimate. Your technology is not compatible for the growth of the yorik coral. It is learning how to integrate itself as it grows." Wryadra made a motion with his right hand, which was missing three fingers, and Kadat handed him another seeding pod. "But it will happen nonetheless. Yun-Ne'Shel will give it life. Do you think Anakin will appreciate it if we add a pen for a hive of grutchin?"
Lando closed his eyes and counted backwards from a hundred. Never in his life did he think he'd become an interior designer for a hybrid Vong ship. "Why don't we wait until his return? Let's stick with the plasma and laser weapons for now."
"The ship will not be ready for either for a while. A grutchin pit can be grown any time."
"Then maybe we can add it to the second level or something."
There was a trilling sound, the signal that the membrane door was opening. "Hi."
"Danni," Lando smiled. "I'd shake your hand, but it's covered in, well. I don't want to think about what it's covered in."
"That's alright," Danni's eyes twinkled. "General Antilles wants to meet with the three of you. Something about making bait for the next Vong commander who tries to take this place back."
"Making bait? What does he want us to do? Create a giant tasty roast and hang it over a pit with spikes at the bottom?"
"As amusing as the idea of a Vong commander jumping up and down for a hanging piece of roast, I don't think that's it. General Antilles is calling this next project 'Starlancer.' It doesn't sound like anything to do with a tasty roast."
"'Starlancer?'"

"Yeah. When I asked about it, he responded by asking me how big I thought lambent crystals grew."
[T] [T]
Borleias Occupation, Day 39
The arrival of the new Yuuzhan Vong commander two days earlier had upped the stakes for everyone at Borleias. Though they had been subject to the constant harassment from the Vong forces at Pyria VI, and the hit-and-run attacks from the Vong ground forces all around the biotics facility, the new Vong commander appeared to be one of the bigger players in their military.
For one, he had arrived in his own Worldship. Unless the Yuuzhan Vong were giving the defenders of Borleias their equivalent of Eldo Davip, it was likely this new commander was a skilled and cautious veteran who knew his way around the battlefield. The fact that he managed to reign in the attacks of the myriad of surviving Vong also showed that he commanded the respect of his people.
His 'hello, I'm your new opponent' greeting had been to dump several dozen slaves out into the vacuum of space in full view of Jaina and her Twin Suns flight. Something that had left Jaina fuming for the rest of that day.
But, now that the Vong commander had arrived, everyone was firing on all cylinders preparing for his eventual attack. It was fortunate that the children and non-essential personnel had been evacuated a day before the arrival of the new Yuuzhan Vong commander. Myri and Syal Antilles, Ben Skywalker, and countless others were now onboard the *Errant Venture* en route to the Maw.
With his children safe, Wedge proved to be as devious a strategist as he was a pilot. Several of his plans were already in place as he prepared everyone for the Yuuzhan Vong onslaught.
[T] [T]
The pilots for the X-wings and single clawcraft of Twin Suns climbed out of their crafts. Another day of baiting and confusing the new commander with Operation Starlancer's 'pipe-fighters' had gone off without a hitch. Coralskippers hung back at a distance to watch them maneuver, but refrained from engaging.
At least, for the time being.
The defenders of Borleias were betting that the new commander's curiosity would get the better of him sooner or later and he'd make a move against these new, but overall useless ships.
Jaina bypassed the rest of her squadron without a word. Not that she didn't enjoy hanging out with her fellow pilots, but a goddess could not be seen mingling with the common folk.

Since their arrival, Sharr Latt and the other Wraiths had been as helpful as they had been annoying when it came to her Yun-Harla persona. The protocol and rules they had laid down for her and the others at the base had left her feeling isolated. But at the same time, the tricks and traps they had devised for her had made her glad that these sneaky people were on her side. In a perverse way, Jaina couldn't wait for the new commander to attack. This way she'd be able to test out all the little nasties her Wraith friends had developed.
After a quick shower and a change of clothes, Jaina left her quarters and sought out the only person she was allowed to converse openly with in public. Said person was currently training her own personal army of fanatical Vong, which now numbered close to fifty. The entire Shamed population of the base, as well as a couple who had run away from the Vong camps in the jungle, were now Freed Ones. Tahiri and Mara even had to volunteer Corran's help in managing and training the sizable force. Jaina smiled wickedly as she imagined the look on the Vong commander's face when he learned of this new threat.
Sensing Jaina's approach, Tahiri halted the exercises and smiled at Jaina. "Hey."
Jaina noted the grass stains on Tahiri's clothing. "Returned from a patrol?"
Tahiri nodded, moving off to the row of benches set up alongside the biotics facility. "Mara and I spent a few hours with some of the new recruits playing hide-and-seek with a couple of warriors. Since the new commander arrived, they've been keeping their distance. Though they did try to kill the three Freed Ones Mara and I had with us."
"It's strange hearing you refer to Aunt Mara that way," Jaina chuckled, joining Tahiri in the shade. "So everything is going well then?"
"More or less. So, what's up? Did you come to talk with 'the-girl-who-speaks-to-scarheads'?"
Jaina raised an eyebrow.
"A bunch of soldiers still have it out for me and the Freed Ones," Tahiri waved off her concern. "It's nothing serious yet. But they are getting on my nerves."
"Have you told General Antilles about this?"
"I don't need to go crying to their commanding officer just because they said mean things to me," Tahiri said, rolling her eyes. "Besides, at least they say something. It's a little freaky when they just stare."
"Well, if there's anything I can do…" Jaina said. Her time helping Tahiri train the Freed Ones had caused them to become closer, and Jaina couldn't help but feel slightly protective of a girl she was fast considering to be a younger sister. It also helped that the Freed Ones

considered Tahiri, Yun-Shuno; or at the very least, the avatar of Yun-Shuno. This made Tahiri a goddess of sorts as well and the only person who was, in Sharr Latt's words, 'equal in status' to Jaina.
"I'll let you know," Tahiri grinned. "Hey, did you know that Twin Suns pilot, Zindra, was talking to me earlier about training a couple of Freed Ones to use an X-wing?"
"Really?"
"Uh huh," Tahiri wiggled her bare toes in the dirt. "We were talking about how some of the New Republic commandoes were training with the Freed Ones, and then one of the Wraiths came by. I forget his name, the big guy who likes blowing things up and getting on your nerves?"
Jaina rolled her eyes. "Kell Tainer?"
"Yeah, that's the one," Tahiri continued her story energetically. "He watched us train for a few moments, then challenged Czalpak, the Freed One best in hand-to-hand, to a match. Kell won, but he stayed behind to help teach the others. At the end of it all, he said that they'd make fine Wraiths, if only they knew how to fly. Then Zindra had that crazy idea and even Kell looked like he was considering it."
Jaina simply smiled and listened to Tahiri talk. After the merger of her personalities, Tahiri had initially been more guarded, careful with her words. It was only when she was with someone she trusted that she let her guard down and appeared a little more like the Tahiri everyone remembered. Jaina felt honored that she was among the very few people Tahiri dropped her guard for.
"So, you're still going to that mission on Coruscant?" Jaina asked, once she managed to get a word in.
Tahiri nodded. "I have a duty to the Freed Ones I trained."
"It's Coruscant," Jaina said, eyes briefly flicking to the younger teen. "Completely Vong controlled."
"I can speak the language. I know how they think. No one knows them better than me. Besides, Mara is coming too."
"I know, I know," Jaina groaned, the defensiveness in Tahiri's voice making her mentally curse. Getting this close to Tahiri hadn't been intentional. It only meant that Tahiri was one more person who could really hurt her or be hurt if one of them died. At least when they went to rescue Jacen, they could all look out for each other. But now, Tahiri, who was several years her junior and striving to prove to herself, and to Anakin, that she wasn't a little girl anymore; was going to the heart of Vong territory with minimal support. "I wish I could go in your place."
"You know that'd be too dangerous," Tahiri said softly, sensing the shift in Jaina's emotions. Jaina's Force presence was so similar to Anakin's

that Tahiri reflexively bypassed Jaina's faint emotional barriers before she even realized what she was doing. "Sorry."
"No," Jaina shook her head. She held Tahiri's eyes and lowered her barriers completely. "I guess, since we're out here, saying what I'm thinking would be a bad thing for my godly image."
Tahiri swallowed at the surge of emotion and suddenly understood Jaina's reluctance to let her go on the mission. It wasn't because Jaina thought she was too young, or couldn't handle a mission of such importance, but it was because Jaina didn't want someone close to her to die. Jaina was using all of her skills and strength to keep those around her alive, and here Tahiri was, going away from Jaina's protective shield.
"It's weird," Tahiri said softly, looking away.
Jaina's eyebrows rose. "That's not really a nice thing to say considering what I just shared with you."
"I'm sorry, it's not that. Not really. It's just," a faint smile flickered across Tahiri's face as a single tear escaped her eyes. "It's weird knowing that someone other than Anakin is looking out for me. Really looking out for me in all the ways that count."
"Oh."
"When we first met, Anakin told me that he would be my family. Since, you know, I didn't have any. I never really thought about it after that because he was almost always around, I could always feel how he was doing because we were just so close. And when he left Borleias and closed off our bond; it made me discover just how lonely a place this galaxy can be. But then Mara takes me in and helps me get my head on straight, and here you are, caring so much about me that you're practically making yourself sick with worry. Everything I feel from you. From Anakin. Even from Mara. Is...is that what having a family is supposed to feel like?"
Jaina did her best to hide her own tears. It wouldn't do to have Yun-Harla crying out in public. "That and more, Tahiri. Much more."
"I don't really have any good examples to go off of," Tahiri said, a wistful note in her voice as she looked down at her feet. "Parents killed. Raised by Sand People. Love and caring isn't really high up there in terms of importance for them. Especially for an outsider human kid. Then, the memories that were implanted into the old Tahiri's head. The Yuuzhan Vong don't even have a word for love in their vocabulary, at least not in the romantic, family sense."
"Well," Jaina said, draping an arm around the younger teen. "You *are* a part of my family, *our* family, no matter what. Don't ever doubt that, Tahiri. Mom and dad already adore you. You already know how I feel.

Jacen cares about you too. All we need to do is wait for a couple of years and hope my little brother is smart enough to make it official."
"Jaina!" Tahiri blurted, blushing at the idea.
"Don't tell me you haven't thought of it?" Jaina said teasingly.
"No! Yes... You're mean," Tahiri pouted, the corners of her mouth twitching.
"Listen, I just thought of a great good luck present to give you before you go off on your mission. Don't leave unless I give it to you."
"A good luck gift?"
"You'll see. Think of it as motivation to get back here alive," Jaina reached over to muss Tahiri's hair.
And was completely surprised to suddenly find herself staring up at the sky, flat on her back.
"Oh Suns! I'm sorry," Tahiri stammered.
"Ouch" Jaina wheezed, the wind still knocked out of her.
"Sorry," Tahiri said contritely. "It's a Domain Kwaad thing. We don't let anyone touch the top of our heads."
"So if I really dislike someone, I just tell them that rubbing your head is good luck?" Jaina managed, sliding back onto the bench.
"Really, I'm sorry, Jaina."
"Don't worry about it. I'm fine. I just learned another fun fact about you. Does Anakin know about the no-touching-the-head thing?"
Tahiri looked away, mumbling something as she did.
"Sorry, I didn't catch that."
"It's a sign of submission to one's lover…or potential lover," Tahiri said red-faced.
"Oh." Jaina felt her own cheeks warm with embarrassment. "So…I'm guessing he won't have to worry about provoking the same reaction I did?"
Tahiri turned even redder. "This is just another one of those things that happen with family, isn't it?"
"Teasing siblings, it's like rule number one," Jaina nodded.
"Can't I just pick and choose the best parts?"
"I'm afraid not," Jaina grinned.
Though Tahiri sighed in defeat, her contentment and happiness was very clear in the Force. Mara and Luke, who had been training the Freed Ones, glanced over in Jaina and Tahiri's direction with identical looks of surprise. It was not often they felt such emotions flow freely from the young blond girl. At least not without Anakin present. Mara quirked a questioning eyebrow in the direction of the two younger Jedi, and Tahiri looked away, her cheeks still tinged with pink.

"Now I know what Anakin means about the downside to knowing so many Force-sensitive people," Tahiri mumbled, frantically trying to clear her mind. She *did* have the attention of Luke and Mara Skywalker after all.
"Yeah," Jaina said, understanding what Tahiri was referring to. It was kind of hard to get romantic with anyone, knowing that every single Force-sensitive nearby knew what you were doing. It was one of the few times she was grateful that her dad wasn't a Jedi. That'd have been traumatizing for all parties involved.
"Look, Jaina," Tahiri drew her lower lip beneath her teeth for a second. "I'll be okay. I'm going with a group of people who do these insane missions for a living. In fact, because I can literally think like a Yuuzhan Vong, I probably have even a better chance of surviving than the others."
"I know," Jaina exhaled. "But still…"
"I'll be fine," Tahiri repeated, a small reassuring smile flickering across her earnest features. "I'm finally finding my place in this screwed up galaxy. I'm not going to let that go any time soon."
[T] Chapter End [T]
A\N: So ends Rebel Dream...The Coruscant mission will be the primary plot in Rebel Stand, with Tarc, Viqi Shesh, and a surprise character making their appearances. It'll also reveal what happened to Lord Nyax since Jacen's rescue. Ganner also gets his own original adventure in Rebel Stand and Jaina finally gets together with a love interest, so stay tuned. April First is the tentative posting date, very likely to change. Review if you so desire, then go on to the next chapter. Just a bit of a warning, it's a bit dark.

ADA 15 Interlude II

Fifteen
[X] [X]
"***You must learn to crawl before you can walk. Learn to listen, before you can talk. Learn to feel before you can see. Learn to live before you can be."***
The voice echoed in Anakin's head as he piloted his X-wing over, under, and around a myriad of asteroids floating aimlessly in space. After nearly a week and a half of travel, a couple of wild days spent escaping from a zealous Peace Brigade leader who called himself Commander General Rinmek, and a refueling and resupply trip, he and

Alema were finally nearing their destination. But as they drew closer, so too did an intense feeling of foreboding.
"I'm not the only one hearing that, right?" Alema sounded on edge.
"I hear it too," Anakin murmured.
"Good, for a moment I thought I was going insane."
"You think you are Jedi, do you not? What is a Jedi but a word? If they are for peace, why carry they a sword? Jedi is light and Sith is dark? How closed are your minds, you must return to the start."
"It's starting to freak me out a little. I don't like the way I can hear that voice in my head."
Anakin swallowed, searching for the asteroid he sought amidst a field of tumbling space rock. "Try to block it out, we're almost there."
"So, answers is it you seek? Come, come, but be warned, they are not for the weak. You come here to be reborn again. Reborn in the Force, reborn in life, reborn in a galaxy alit with strife. You will enter as one, leave as another. Rebirth will make you great, greater even than your brother."
Anakin nearly sent his X-wing into a passing asteroid in shock as he suddenly got the distinct impression that the presence was speaking directly to him. It was as if someone was staring at him; through space, the X-wing, his flight-suit, seeing him as a Force entity and nothing else.
"I am impressed, you've answered the call. Now is the time for your rise. Or dare I say it, your fall." To Anakin's complete bewilderment, a fuzzy white creature he quickly recognized as his old master Ikrit, floated at his side. "Not many people would have your strength, Anakin. Have no fear, this is where your new life will begin."
Anakin's forehead was scrunched with confusion. He could now hear Master Ikrit's voice as an actual voice, rather than a formless echo in his mind. Master Ikrit was no ghost; that was for certain. He was practically tangible, a warm presence on his lap, with none of the usual aura that came with being a Force manifestation of a past Jedi Master. In fact, Anakin was pretty sure he could sense his old master once more.
"Master Ikrit?"
"Is there another you could mistake me for?"
"But you died on Yavin Four"
"That does not mean I do not exist.
"Errr...Anakin."
"Alema?" Anakin felt a surge of emotion travel from the Twi'lek.
"Numa's with me."

"As in your sister?"
"Yeah, my sister," Alema choked out*. "But I saw her die! How is it possible?"*
"I don't know," Anakin swallowed.
Ikrit cocked his head up at Anakin, the master's floppy ears shifting. "The asteroid you are searching for, young Anakin, is over there."
Anakin felt a tug on the Force and turned in the direction. If Ikrit had not pointed it out, Anakin didn't think he'd have been able to find it. It was a large asteroid, one of the largest in the field. Yet, at the same time, it was nearly hidden from view, a seemingly unimportant piece of space rock. Abandoned mining equipment decorated the outside of the rotating rock, some machines looking very old.
"Alema, I think I see our destination, follow me in and let's see if we can't figure this out."
[X] [X]
There was a minimal atmosphere inside the icy cold hangar bay, air and gravity. How the magnetic containment field that kept out the vacuum of space was still operation, was a mystery. Anakin exhaled, his breath crystalizing in the darkened hangar, illuminated only by the faint light of the distant sun. Climbing out of his fighter, he gazed about the deathly still room.
Alema joined him at his side, a bewildered expression on her face as she tightly held the hand of a blue Twi'lek that could only be her sister.
"Numa?" Anakin said, seeing the confusion in Alema's eyes.
"It is nice to meet you at last. I can see why Alema is interested in a Jedi of your caliber," Numa said, her predatory grin so similar to her sister's.
"I would ask this question to Ikrit, but as a Jedi Master, he's probably obligated to respond in a riddle or be evasive about it," Anakin said, glancing to the white fluffy Jedi master at his feet. "But…"
"How am I here?" Numa said, sliding her hand free from her sister's. "Alema needed me. I would not let her do this alone."
"But you're dead."
"Really?" Numa ran her hands over her body and cocked her head to the side. "Doesn't feel like it."
"It's her," Alema whispered softly, her voice pleading with Anakin to confirm her belief. "She has her same presence, sounds like her, even looks like her. I don't know how, but she's here."
"And so is Master Ikrit," Anakin said, feeling more lost than ever. His normally sharp mind felt clouded. Whether it was because of the sudden appearances of these dead individuals or due to the asteroid they were on, he did not know.

"So we followed your Force vision to this place?" Alema looked around. Dust covered the terminals and antiquated equipment that lined the walls of the room. From what little could be seen, it appeared as if no one had been at the asteroid for a very long time.
Anakin broke out a glowstick, its faint green light offering only a few more meters of illumination. Everywhere was the same. Cold and dark.
"Numa," Alema said, breaking out a blue glow stick of her own. The combined blue and green lighting only served to highlight the gloomy iciness of the asteroid. "Do you know anything about this place?"
"I don't know, sis. Why don't we go further in and find out?"
"Go further into a creepy asteroid that's so strong in the Force even the machinery appear alive?" Alema said incredulously.
"Leave it up to Anakin then. You did follow him here after all."
"Right, good idea," Alema said. "So, Anakin. Where in this place do you think has that secret weapon that will help you vape the Vong for good?"
"I haven't got a clue," Anakin shook his head. The tingling feeling of being watched hadn't stopped, even upon landing. In fact, the sensation had only grown stronger. "Though we'd probably freeze to death out here if we stay here any longer. Let's go further in and try to start up the systems."
"The mag-con field works, so this place still has some power," Numa agreed. "Master Fuzzy-Rabbit and I will cover your backs."
"Fuzzy-Rabbit?" Anakin regretted looking at Ikrit at that point. The aged master had curled up in a ball to keep warm, his floppy ears covering his head. Was it bad to think of your former teacher as a Force-sensitive rabbit?
"The young one is correct," Ikrit stirred. "This is a quest for the two of you. We will back you up if needed."
Anakin nodded once. "Regretting coming along?"
"Anakin," Alema said as they walked to one of the hangar bay doors. Both Ikrit and Numa followed several steps behind. "By coming with you, I got to see my sister again. Feel her through the Force. I know she died, but I never thought I'd be able to just….if this is some cruel trick I got dibs on the one responsible."
"If it is a trick, we have to figure out how whoever it is managed to do it," Anakin murmured. "They copied Master Ikrit perfectly, right down to his personality. But I saw him get killed by those Peace Brigaders. There's no way he could be alive again. It's not possible."
"They're not clones though," Alema said, her voice low. "Otherwise how'd they just appear in our cockpits in the middle of space?"

They passed another door, not noticing its slow close until the heavy door thudded shut behind them. Their footsteps and ragged breathing were the only things they heard for the next hour as they wandered through the twisting corridors. Time seemed to stretch on and on as they rounded one corner after another. They eventually found themselves on a network of crisscrossing walkways that stretched around a giant drilling apparatus. The walkway split off in two directions, and the Force urged them towards both.
"You and Numa take one side, Master Ikrit and I take the other?" Anakin asked.
"Sounds good," Alema agreed. She then looked over her shoulder for her sister. "Anakin! We lost them!"
Anakin turned around as well, his Force probes joining Alema's as they searched for their companions. Try as they might, however, they couldn't find anyone else on the asteroid.
A skittering sound.
Anakin and Alema searched for the source.
More skittering sounds, this time it sounded like a swarm of insects. Yet, neither Jedi could see anything.
"Think we should go back to our fighters now?" Alema asked, her anxiety matching Anakin's.
"Good idea," Anakin replied warily.
Before either had taken a step backwards, the skittering sounds became amplified and continuous. And it was coming from the direction they had come from.
"What do you think it is?" Alema whispered, green eyes dilated as she pulled out her lightsaber.
"Bugs?" Anakin tried to get a feel for whatever was approaching. The sounds continued to get louder, yet they could neither see nor sense anything.
"Bugs invisible to the Force?" Alema groaned. "I had enough of that with the Vong."
"We should be able to see them by now," Anakin squinted down the passageway, but the glowsticks illuminated nothing.
Alema and Anakin slowly began to back up as the skittering sound got closer and closer. It now sounded as if the invisible bugs were directly in front of them.
Suddenly, both Jedi jerked in alarm. An icy crawling sensation which began at their feet, rapidly ascending up their bodies. Thousands of tiny pin-pricks, bites, stingers. The Jedi frantically brushed at themselves, only transferring the sensations to their hands, up their arms. With every prick, the pain intensified.

"What is this?" Alema cried out, shaking her lekku wildly.
The pain became overwhelming, both Jedi dropping their lightsabers and curling up into balls in an attempt to protect themselves. But just as sudden and unexpected as the attack had been, it was over. The skittering sound disappearing down the mine shaft, the pain receding.
Panting, both Jedi reached out through the Force to alleviate any wounds they had obtained. Only, the moment they did they realized that not only were they untouched, but the pain was gone as well.
"What was that?" Alema breathed, picking up her lightsaber and keeping it active.
Anakin just shook his head. Still trying to recover from the unexpected attack. His mind was a whirl with thoughts, trying to figure out why the Force would lead him to this place and what it expected of him.
"Do you think whatever it was got Numa and your old master?"
"Those things didn't leave any permanent damage." Anakin tried to see the end of one of the walkways the Force was urging him to go down. "And we couldn't sense anyone else. It might have been a Force illusion? This place seems strong in the Force after all."
"An illusion could make us hear and feel that?" Alema edged down the opposite path, peering around the giant drill. "I have got to meet the one responsible and give him a piece of my mind."
"The one responsible might have even had us imagine Master Ikrit and your sister," Anakin said seriously. "He or she could have been manipulating us without us even realizing it."
Alema spun to face Anakin. "What? But I held Numa in my arms, held her hand."
"I'm just saying that something or someone powerful is using this place to manipulate our senses. If we're not careful, there's no telling what else they have up their sleeve."
"Great, attacking a powerful mind-manipulator in their home base. In your vision that brought us here, did either of us die by any chance?"
"It wasn't that sort of vision," Anakin muttered. "You can always go back to Borleias if you don't want to do this."
"I can vape Vong any day. Learn some new Force techniques to help me vape them faster is a much better way to spend my time." Alema unhooked her other lightsaber with a shaky grin. "So, we going back to your original plan? One of us goes down one way, the other, the other way?"
"You want to split up?" Anakin raised an eyebrow. "In every single holovid I've seen. Splitting up in a dark scary place with no backup and no idea what's ahead, never ends well."

"But you feel it too, don't you? The Force wants us to go down both paths."
"We can go your way first, then double back and go to the other side after."
"Or we can see who those two are," Alema motioned to shadowy figures coming from either side of the forked walkway.
Reaching out towards the figure nearest him, Anakin froze. "Never mind, I know who one of them is."
"And I know who the other is," Alema activated her other lightsaber.
"Another illusion?"
"Has to be," Anakin replied, watching as the figure closest to him activated her blue lightsaber blade, illuminating her blond hair. It was a disorientating sight, something that made him shake his head in denial. "Otherwise how else can they be here?"
"How else do you think I got here, Anakin?" Tahiri hissed. "You abandon me *again*. I thought we'd gone beyond that stage."
"You're not real," Anakin replied in clipped tones, deactivating his saber. Out of the corner of his eyes, he saw Alema say similar words to her old master, Daeshara'cor. "You can't be here."
"Not real?" Tahiri scoffed, slashing out with her lightsaber.
Anakin let out a gasp, collapsing to the ground as Tahiri's blade drove through his thigh, burning through muscle and bone with ease. The pain and disbelief sent his mind reeling.
"That feel real enough, *Solo?*" Tahiri snapped angrily. "I'm not a little girl anymore, so stop thinking of me like one! I thought you of all people would know how I feel. But obviously, I was mistaken. Hero-boy isn't meant to be a complement, Anakin. That's just what you are. A little boy who plays hero because it makes everyone else happy. And what did that get you? Your dad lost his best friend! Hapans lost their family members! Alema lost her master and sister! Master Ikrit died! I was shaped! And what about everyone on Myrkr! You think way too highly of yourself, Mr. Solo. If you thought I'd just wait like a good girl for you to return, you're even dumber and more self-centered than I thought!"
"Tahiri?" Anakin breathed faintly, gripping his injured leg. Off to the side, Alema was engaged in an all-out lightsaber duel with her former master. Her master was retreating down a pathway and Alema chased after her. Still trying to make sense of everything, he looked to Tahiri. "But…how are you here?"
"I followed you, of course," Tahiri growled, crouching down by him and poked a finger into his chest. "Followed you to tell you that whatever we had is over. You're just going to keep doing this. Running off

without even thinking for yourself. Eventually, you're going to get yourself killed. Tell me, Anakin, why in the suns of Tatooine should I care for someone with a death wish?"
Anakin couldn't help but feel a deep spike of guilt as he listened to her accusations. The reason why he felt it so much, because in a way, they were true. Unable to deny it, he tried to search their bond, tried to find some way to fix what he had done.
Only, he ran into a wall.
She was completely blocking him.
"No cheating this time, Solo," Tahiri said. "And you just failed your test. If you could answer me without trying to find out my thoughts, I might have given you another chance. But now, well you just blew it. Good bye, Anakin. Hope your quest for answers was worth ruining something that could have been great."
Anakin clutched at his chest as a searing pain burst through it. The phrase 'ripping one's heart out of one's chest and stomping on it' was an apt description of what Anakin felt. When the pain was gone, he felt an immense emptiness. It was a numb feeling. An understanding that he had just lost something irreplaceable and would never get it back. Tahiri had forcible severed their Force bond, completely obliterating it. He couldn't even feel her presence any more. The shock of it left him dazed.
He looked to her, wondering if she was feeling the same agony he was. A single tear was dripping down her cheek, but that was it. Her green eyes were solid stone.
"Thanks to your heroism, I was made to endure pain, to use it," Tahiri's voice was but a whisper. "It's better to feel this now than down the line. At least this way, your death won't even hurt me. Go on, keep doing what you're doing. Just know, you're now doing it without me."
Anakin frantically tried to get to his feet as Tahiri began to walk down one of the darkened hallways, but he stumbled and fell. "Wait! Tahiri!"
"I thought you'd be happy, Anakin. You've finally got your wish. I've nothing more to say to you."
Tahiri's retreating form disappeared into the shadows, leaving Anakin broken and staring unseeingly down the hallway. His best friend, his closest companion, had just walked away. The burning pain in his leg a minor thing compared to the gnawing ache in his chest.
"I did warn you, didn't I?" Jacen voice said in mild rebuke. "You just can't keep doing what you've been doing and expect everything to work out. You compound one mistake with another, and people die and get hurt. Your views in the Force were about as helpful to the Order as the next Sith Lord."

Anakin lifted his head again and saw his brother and sister standing over him, disappointment clear in their expressions.
"I thought you were going to change the Order for the better," Jaina said scornfully. "I had no idea that what you really were trying to do was boost your own ego. I hope all the deaths and suffering you caused was worth it, Little Brother. I really do. I'm only glad Tahiri managed to cut her ties with you while she still could."
"Jaya? Jacen?" Anakin managed.
"We came here with Tahiri to see just why you ran off and left the rest of us to fight on Borleias," Jaina said darkly. Jacen had shaken his head in disgust and was already walking away. "I never thought you'd be a coward, Anakin. Then again, you've let others die for you before."
"But I didn't!" Anakin managed. "I didn't want them to die for me! I don't have all the answers, but everyone expects so much!"
"Grow up, Anakin!" Jaina snapped. "When things work out for you, you get so full of yourself it's disgusting. When they don't, you blame everyone else around you for expecting so much. You blame yourself for the deaths you caused. You're just a kid, Anakin. A kid trying to be an adult. And look what happened because you pretended! The deaths are all your fault. Yours only, Anakin. Think long and hard about every widow, orphan, parent, and sibling who has lost someone they loved because you tried to be someone you weren't."
Each word cut into Anakin deep, already he could feel only a faint echo to where his bond with Jacen had once been. Another jolt of emptiness, as he felt Jaina likewise sever their sibling bond.
And it was all his fault. All of it. He wasn't the hero everyone wanted to be. Jaina and Jacen were right. So many people had already died because *he* had believed the praises of the others. Believed that he could actually make a difference in the war. But as the words of his brother, sister, and ex-girlfriend circled his mind, Anakin felt himself grow more and more numb. The truth hurt badly, hurt so much he tried to distance himself from the empty feeling their absences had left him. The glowstick sputtered out. All a very cold and tired Anakin was left with was the pitch blackness of the room and his own doubts and guilt.
[X] [X]
Alema slashed wildly at her former teacher, rage coursing through her veins and sweat dripping down her face. A part of her knew that it was a trick. That Daeshara'cor couldn't actually be in front of her. Yet, the words, spoken in the voice of her teacher, were biting, accusatory.
"Is this how your sister died?" Daeshara'cor scoffed, untouched by any of Alema's onslaughts. "Because of your reckless technique and stupidity?"

"Shut up!"
"I heard that because you were too slow, a voxyn melted her face off. It appears you haven't changed a bit since then. I thought I taught the two of you better than that." Daeshara'cor continued walking backwards down the rock-lined hallway, effortlessly deflecting Alema's attacks.
Alema let out a roar and lunged with both sabers, a bronze-red blade and her original silver blade piercing the air. Daeshara'cor sidestepped both attacks and drove her own saber through Alema's shoulder. In pain, Alema dropped her silver blade, the dead-man switch extinguishing its bright light instantly.
Now, only Daeshara'cor's blood-red blade and Alema's bronze blade lit the corridor. Daeshara was shaking her head in disapproval. "I go away for only a little bit and find that one of my apprentices has caused the death of the other. Worse, it was the death of the stronger sister and all I am left with is the weaker of the two. Someone who can't even wield one blade correctly, let alone two. Did you really think you could avenge Numa with that sloppy fighting style of yours."
"Shut up, shut up, shut up," Alema gritted out, green-eyes flashing briefly to striated yellow. "You are not my Master. Even if you were, you would know that getting me angry is the last thing you want to do."
"So you'll glare at me to death?" Daeshara chuckled.
"Oh, you'll die," Alema steadied her grip on her remaining saber. The yorik-coral, polymer handle felt alien in her grip, but it also served to fuel her anger. A reminder of the race that had killed her sister. Alema touched the lambent crystal within, promptly shoving aside its personality, its own will, and replacing it with her own. It existed to serve her, to kill her enemies, and for no other purpose. The ultimate of ironies, a Vong crystal being used by a Jedi to kill Vong. Vong and whatever specter was pretending to be her past teacher. "You'll die there's no doubt about it. The only thing I'm thinking of is how to make that happen."
"Come then, my apprentice. Let's see if you have what it takes to kill me." With that, Daeshara'cor deactivated her own lightsaber and stepped into the shadows of a nearby room.
Alema followed cautiously, edging into the doorway and using her lightsaber to illuminate the room. Dusty cargo crates were stacked all over the place and thick ventilation piping formed a maze on the ceiling.
"Come on out!" Alema called. "If you are so eager to die, why hide!"

An attack from above, only for a split second. By the time Alema realigned herself to counter, her attacker had disappeared back further into the room. Alema's sole purpose was focused on destroying this creature. The one who dared to mock the people closest to her. Another sudden lunge. A flash of a lightsaber. A dart of a shadow. Only the humming of Alema's lightsaber could be heard.
Alema's fingers were stinging from the frosty, thin air of the unheated asteroid, her lightsaber's bronze-red blade proving none of the warmth its hue would normally suggest.
Alema swiveled on one foot, blocking an unexpected flurry of lightsaber strikes. She was being pushed back, her footing failing her as she struggled against the onslaught. Then, the attacks ended. From the light of her blade, Alema saw Daeshara'cor smirk and step back into the shadows.
"Coward!" Alema yelled, scrambling back to her feet and sprinting into Daeshara'cor's general direction.
"It would be all too easy to kill you now, my apprentice," Daeshara'cor emerged from behind Alema, red blade hovering centimeters from Alema's neck.
Alema bared her sharp teeth and whirled around, batting aside the blade. Daeshara'cor disappeared again.
Alema felt the air behind her shift, and she smirked victoriously. Spinning around, she jammed her lightsaber up to its hilt into the person behind her. Then, looking up into the face of the person she had slain, her smile vanished.
"Numa?" Alema swallowed, reflexively letting go of her lightsaber.
"I sensed you were in trouble," Numa wheezed, covering her wound with both hands. "I came to help."
Alema's skin was now a pale blue as she gripped her sister's shoulders. Numa, however, had closed her eyes. "Numa…what…why?"
"She just told you, didn't she?" Daeshara'cor emerged once more, lightsaber again humming at the back of Alema's skull. "She came to help you. And for a second time, your sister dies."
Alema hugged her sister to her, a terrible rage boiling in her as she shook her head in denial. "No!"
"Oh yes. Even when given a second chance with her, you still waste it."
"No!" Alema snarled, setting her sister onto the floor. She looked over her shoulder and glared at Daeshara'cor, her former master's red blade now illuminating completely yellow irises.
"You're weak. Pathetic. A waste of life," Daeshara'cor chortled. "Your sister could have done much more than you. Look at you. Following that Solo boy around like a lost hound. Living only to avenge her.

Maybe you haven't realized it yet, but it doesn't matter how many Vong you kill in the name of seeking revenge. It doesn't matter because you are the one responsible."
"I said," Alema began in a low voice, trembling with rage. "Shut up!" Alema thrust out her hand and Force Lightning streamed out. Alema had the brief satisfaction of watching Daeshara'cor's eyes widen in surprise, shortly before the lightning threw her back into a pile of crates. Alema rose from her kneeling position, lightning crackling in one hand and her lightsaber held in the other.
"What? No words now? If you wanted to get me angry, you succeeded. You really did. Now, I'll make you regret it." Alema saw the still twitching body of her former master, and blasted it with another wave of Force Lightning. "I don't need to worry about being powerful or weak. That's not my job. I simply will kill anyone who threatens the peace of this galaxy. And you, *master*, fall into that category."
With one last sweep of her lightsaber, Alema decapitated the downed form of her former master. Immediately, the body dissipated, like smoke. Panting, Alema looked back over to where her sister was. Numa had also disappeared. It was as if the two had never existed. Striated yellow eyes flickered back to normal green, and Alema's legs gave out. Sitting in the freezing cargo hold, steam rose from Alema's enraged form. Trying to calm herself, Alema deactivated her lightsaber. Her hands were clenched tightly. The darkness of the room closing in around her.
Experimentally, a ball of Force Lightning flickered to life in her hand. Alema studied the crackling, life-destroying energy with an odd detachment. Now that she had actually done it, summoning lightning didn't seem so hard. The reservoir of anger and hate that she felt over her sister's death was more accessible than before. Closer to the surface. Even though she had used a Sith technique for a decidedly dark side action, Alema found that she didn't care.
She clenched her fist, crushing the lightning out of existence.
A hoarse laughter filled the room and madness took hold.
[X] [X]
Anakin awoke to find himself naked in a bed with dark silken sheets. Someone had bandaged up his leg, it no longer hurt. But then again, the pain he had felt from it had never been all that significant to begin with. He sat up, the sheet sliding down as he stared out a wide window that gave him an unobstructed view of the stars. The rest of the room was constructed of dark rock. Glowsticks were strewn about, faintly illuminating the room.

Anakin took it all in without caring. He was empty. A failure. Everything he had done, tried to do, a waste of time. Strangely enough, Anakin didn't feel the crushing pain such thoughts should have given him. Nor did he care about his lack of clothing or the fact that he was in a strange place without any memory of how he got there. The last thing he remembered was an all-encompassing darkness, misery, then… nothing.

He watched asteroids tumble by, the stars shifting slowly with every revolution of the asteroid he was in, the vastness of space beyond. The galaxy was so large, and for that instant, Anakin couldn't help but feel very small. It was also then, when Anakin realized something else.

He could no longer feel the Force.

His heart gave a loud thud. For so long he had grown used to having the Force at his command. To help him see the galaxy in a way many others could not. But now he was blind to it all. Deaf to the natural rhythm of the galaxy. Unable to feel the intricacies that made up every block of life, moved everything. Anakin knew that he had been more powerful than many of the older Jedi, that his ability to command the Force was better than most. But now, none of it mattered.

Anakin felt a raspy chuckle escape his throat. He wasn't sure why he felt relieved. It was like a massive weight had been lifted off his shoulders. His own brother and sister hated him. His best friend had turned her back on him. Nothing he did worked out. Why would he need the Force anymore?

He let his head fall back onto the pillow and gazed vacantly at the jagged ceiling above. He could no longer feel the Force. Great. Maybe someone else could be the galaxy's hero now. Maybe, finally, he could just go about being the nobody he had always longed to be. Out of the spotlight, of the judging eye of the public. He could make a mistake now and nobody would care. He wasn't the super Jedi or savior of the Order. He was now just Anakin, a seventeen year old kid who was tired of it all.

"So, you've learned at last." A voice said lightly. "That there is no truth in the Force. The only truth that can be found is in you. You know much of knowledge, and of passing down that knowledge to others. But to truly know the full spectrum of the Force, to understand it on a primal level, you must know pain as well. To know yourself, every aspect of your soul, is to fully comprehend everything the Force has to offer. It is a strange thing that Jedi such as yourself shy away from pain rather than try and understand it."

"I am not a Jedi any longer," Anakin replied mechanically, shunning any feeling to the contrary. "The Jedi are better off without me anyways."

"Ah yes. But you are wrong, young Solo. A lightsaber that loses its power is still a lightsaber. Just as a Jedi who loses his power is still a Jedi. Just because you can no longer feel the Force does not mean that the teachings you have learned have been forgotten as well."
"They didn't do me any good, did they?" Anakin said bitterly, not looking to the speaker. "Everything I learned, everything I thought I knew, useless."
"Not completely useless. You are wise enough to recognize this. Wise enough to know that your teachings have been incomplete. As a Jedi, you did well with what knowledge was available to you. It is because your understanding of yourself was not complete that those teachings failed you."
"Even if you say that now. I can't really do anything now that I can no longer feel the Force."
"You are not listening, Solo. You must first delve deep into your own feelings and emotions, know what drives you, before taking any further steps in your training. As to your lack of Force. That, young Solo, is a personal choice. You can feel it again if you so choose."
"And if choose not too?" Anakin said monotonously, not even sure if the other speaker existed or if the entire conversation was taking place in his mind. He was beyond caring. Hurt to the point that he was completely numb.
"Again, the choice is yours. But I have been watching you, Anakin Solo. You came here seeking answers. There are none here. There will only be questions. Questions with answers only you can learn in time. I will show you how to unlock the secrets you have hidden within yourself. It will be a painful process, making you whole again. When you are complete, though, you will be something much more than you are now."
Anakin remained silent.
"Think on it, Anakin Solo. You are welcome to stay here for as long as you desire. I shall leave you with one last thought. Though your family and friends have turned their back on you, will you really allow them to be slain by the Yuuzhan Vong when you have the potential to finally end the war? You are, after all, a Jedi."
[X] [X]
He did not know how long he had been on the asteroid. Food was brought in at regularly scheduled intervals. The bringer of the food would always stay until he had finished eating. Then take the empty tray and leave without another word. The person wore a dark cloak, fully concealing his or her form. A shapeless mask covered all but a pair of striking green eyes. Whenever the person reached out to take

his tray, Anakin noted the white wrappings that covered the figure's arms, and the thick gloves that the person wore over their hands. There was a refresher attached to the room, and Anakin was provided with a loose fitting set of black clothing which he had changed into a while ago. Just outside his room was a common room of sorts; with exercise machines and sports equipment in one corner, a set of couches forming a perimeter around the circular room, and a fountain in the center. Anakin only ever saw his visitor during meal times, and it did not appear that there was anyone else present.

He vaguely wondered about what happened to Alema and thought about asking his caretaker. Had Alema escaped? Died? Would he even have felt her death? A jolt coursed through Anakin's body. If his brother or sister had died, would he have felt *their* deaths? Why couldn't he use the Force, maybe just one more time, to see how they were? Then again, they had cut themselves off from him, so wouldn't it have been pointless?

Frustrated, Anakin picked up one of the chairs and hurled it across the room. It made a hollow clunking sound as it tumbled and came to a crashing halt. His entire family, all his friends could have died, and without the Force, he wouldn't even have a clue. Seeing a row of metal balls lined up on a wall-mounted rack in the recreation section, Anakin stormed over and tore the rack down. Grabbing one ball after another, Anakin threw them every which way. Loud clanking filled the room as they collided and ricocheted off whatever they impacted. He continued his rampage, pulling down the exercise equipment and throwing whatever he could. Eventually, spent, Anakin collapsed into a seated position and hung his head.

He was content without the Force, no longer felt the pressures the galaxy was putting on him. But without the Force, he was alone; blind, deaf, and unable to feel his surroundings as he once did. To use the Force though, would be to open himself up to the emotional pain of the severed bonds of his siblings and best friend. To not use it would mean that he would not even know if they were alive or dead.

Anakin gripped at his hair, fighting back hot tears. It wasn't fair. The same powers that gave him the security of family and friendship also hurt, also placed on him the burden of everyone's hopes and dreams. The same powers that allowed him to do so much good, also constantly tempted him to walk a darker path. The same powers that allowed him to save some lives, weren't enough to save others. Even if he were to regain his powers, unless something changed, it would only be more of the same.

"What do you want to do, Anakin Solo?"

The ghost of a whisper brushed through Anakin's mind. Anakin's fists were clenched in tight balls, arms tight around his knees as he shook his head and rocked back and forth. He was cold, empty. He wanted to use the Force again, but was afraid of the consequences if he did. Wanted to be his normal self again, but feared the responsibilities he would once again have to take up. He was alone, scared. Seventeen years old, yet the galaxy looked to him to end the war. He was a Jedi, and he wasn't. What did he want to do?

"What do you want to do?"

Anakin let out harsh ragged breaths, his eyes reddened from his crying. His stay on the asteroid had been a momentary reprieve. Even if those closest to him no longer cared for him, he had to do something to keep them alive. He couldn't trust anyone else with their lives, but he could barely trust himself too. Doubts, worries swirled around him like a cloak.

"What do you want?"

"To save them all," Anakin whispered softly.

"You have the power. The training. Jedi Master Luke Skywalker has taught you well."

"I need more."

A hidden door off to the side opened. The pathway beyond was completely dark, no illumination at all. A second panel opened, revealing a blaster and vibroblade.

"Then go, young Solo. The path will be painful, but you have made the right choice."

Anakin stood robotically, moving to the two weapons on display. He glanced through tear-stained eyes down the path, seeing nothing. Carefully, he pocketed the vibroblade, then held the blaster out in front of him. Taking a step into the corridor, Anakin was not even surprised when the door closed behind him.

"You must learn how to see and hear once more, Anakin. The Force is what you make of it, not what anyone else tells you it is."

Anakin edged forward, hearing only his breathing. Feeling his way as his bare feet slid across the rocky, rough floor. Then, the floor gave way, and he was sent tumbling down a steep slope amidst heaps of rock and dust. All Anakin could do was cover his head and hold his breath.

When he finally came to a stop, he was cut several times over and his left arm hung at an odd angle. Without the Force, the pain seemed more intense than he could ever remember. Gritting his teeth, he tore off part of his shirt and made a makeshift sling. He blindly searched for his blaster and held it close.

Gradually, his eyes adjusted to the darkness. He was in one of the deeper mine shafts. It was much colder than the section he had come from. The thin clothes he had been given did nothing to stop the chill from stinging his skin. Exhaling on his good hand in order to keep it warm, Anakin glanced back up in the direction he had come. He wouldn't be returning that way, it was too steep.
Shakily, he returned to his feet. With only one direction to go, he headed further into the mine shaft. He walked and walked, not knowing how long he had been down in the shaft or where he was going. Time had no meaning, and he had lost all concept of hunger. He stopped several times to rest, dreaming of things that might be, of things he feared. That fear was what urged him onwards. Ghostly specters and flickers of movement surrounded him with every shadow, with every hollow and niche.
A distinct feeling of evil chilled Anakin to the bone, and he immediately recalled the faint memories of Emperor Palpatine's touch.
This time, the sensations appeared to be more animalistic. Anakin couldn't help but swing his blaster around at the next shadow, and then spin around again. Without the Force he felt much more vulnerable than he had ever felt. It was as if he was being hunted; a hand was about to reach out from the darkness and rend him asunder, a mouth ready to swallow him in a single bite.
"*Do not use your eyes, Anakin Solo. How do you expect to see if you remain blind?"*
Heart pounding, Anakin ignored the voice. The shadows continued to close in on him. His bare feet were cut multiple times as he staggered across the sharp rocks on the ground. A piercing echo, a bird-like shriek, filled the cavern, and Anakin spun around again.
He could barely see where he was going. Didn't even know where the path was taking him.
Mocking laughter, loud and scornful filled the pathway.
Anakin jerked the blaster towards its direction, his good hand shaking, barely holding onto the blaster because the cold made it so numb.
Then, a force struck him, lifting him off the ground and into a nearby wall. Anakin gasped, the wind knocked out of him, his blaster flying out of his grasp. He scrambled for the vibroblade in his pocket, frantically searching for his assailant.
"You will die, Anakin Solo. Is that what you want?"
A blow to Anakin's head sent his vision swimming. A kick to his injured arm, pain nearly making him pass out. Anakin closed his eyes, in an effort to fight off the wave of nausea that had accompanied both blows. The voice was right, he was going to die. Die before he even

had a chance. Immediately a part of him rejected that. He still had much more to do. He kept his eyes closed, drawing in several steady breaths. As he did, , he suddenly realized he could sense something standing in front of him.
It was a beast like creature standing on two legs, a feral hunger accompanying its shadowy appearance. Its presence seemed to phase in and out of existence as it stood over him, tail swishing, claws flashing.
Yet, the creature wasn't all Anakin could sense. To his surprise, Anakin could 'see' the surrounding walls, the expansive nearby caverns and decrepit machinery. The path before him and the path behind him were clearer than ever before.
He could see it, yet not see it. Like a mirage cloaked in an inky haze. He opened his eyes, and after everything he had just seen, it was as if he was blind again.
He was lifted off the ground by the invisible force and thrown into the opposite wall, the throw flipping him in the air and causing him to crash upside-down. Anakin closed his eyes and instinctively knew where this creature was. Panting, Anakin scrambled away just as the creature's foot crashed down into the ground. The rock gave way, and the creature's foot was caught in a crevice.
Summoning his own strength, Anakin dodged the creature's barbed tail and pounced on its back. With his vibroblade, he began to stab it over and over again, yelling as he did. There was no way he was going to let it kill him. He could accomplish so much more with his abilities than it ever could with its mindless, bestial instincts. Anakin continued stabbing it, and eventually it gave a thunderous roar and dissolved into wisps of smoke.
Anakin was deposited unceremoniously onto the ground, his ankle twisting. He opened his eyes from the pain and let out a breath. Absently reaching for where the creature had been, Anakin let out a relieved laugh.
"I did it." He managed weakly. He closed his eyes and tried to recall that feeling of desperation, his desire to stretch out and see his attacker.
Quicker than before, the cavern came back into focus in its murky haze, and with it, a whole group of the wraith-like creature he had defeated. Anakin scrambled to his feet, wincing as he put his weight on his sore ankle. He held up his vibroblade, which had been chipped after repeatedly gouging the first creature.

The creatures were all streaming out from another cavern, being funneled through a narrow passageway that led into the corridor Anakin was in.
"You will not kill me," Anakin said softly, his eyes still closed as he continued to view these creatures through his Force-assisted sight. Anakin felt new strength enter his body. He was not the prey. He was the predator, just like they were. Only he was better. These were creatures of shadow and darkness, they stood no chance against him. Hunger. He suddenly yearned to teach the creatures a lesson in intruding in his space. This was his domain, how dare they trespass? Rip. Kill. Devour.
Anakin's blue eyes widened in shock from behind their closed lids, and Anakin shook his head to rid himself of those thoughts. He didn't know where they had come from. Had he been channeling the thoughts of the beasts in front of him? He didn't dwell on it for long.
Seeing a slight opening, Anakin darted between the beasts and their outstretched claws and tails. He made it through their ranks with only a scrape on his cheek for his efforts. Once he was in the cavern they had come from, Anakin headed for the far wall.
In his shadowy vision of the place, Anakin saw that the wall extended to very high heights. He didn't know if the creatures could climb or not, but with their slightly larger-than-a-human size, he didn't think it would be too easy. Of course, with a sprained ankle and broken arm, it wouldn't be easy for him either.
Panting, Anakin began to ascend. A tail lashed up and cut across the back of his thighs, shredding the legs of his pants. Anakin nearly lost his grip. Through sheer will power alone, though, he pulled himself up even higher. Below, the creatures howled as one, vibrations coursing through the wall and knocking stray bits of rock loose. Shortly after, however, they dissolved into the same wispy substance as the first creature had and left the cavern empty once more.
Anakin didn't stop climbing. It took a while, and every muscle in his body protested his movement, but he finally managed to make it to the top. He sprawled out on the gravel floor, chest heaving as he struggled to draw in breaths of air. His lungs burned with the effort, each gasping breath pulling on the tendons of his broken arm.
Another howl filled the air. Almost in despair, Anakin lifted his head. He saw nothing until he closed his eyes. The pack of creatures he had left behind had materialized on the opposite side of a narrow bridge. They were pulsating darkly in the Force, their aura's full only of hunger.
"At last, you can see. Now, learn to listen."

The narrow bridge was hardly such. The safety railing had long since worn away, leaving only three rows of heavy metal plates linking one side of the tunnel-like chasm to the other. The linked metal plates swayed back and forth as the asteroid slowly rotated on its axis, the old metal groaning eerily with every motion. The chasm itself was little more than two intersecting tunnels, one vertical, the other horizontal, that stretched out into shadow and darkness.

Anakin took a step forward. He found his feet rapidly leaving the ground, and Anakin reached out with a half-frozen hand to grab onto anything he could. Seconds passed as he stayed suspended in the air. Then, as the asteroid rolled, so did the point of gravity, and Anakin found himself pressed to the near wall.

"The asteroid is as much a part of the Force as any living thing is in this galaxy. It contains the souls of many. It is they who move the asteroid to their will. Listen and you will hear them. Listen and you will know them. Engrave their words into your soul. There is no artificial gravity in this part of the asteroid. The rock walls are also the thinnest, so you will likely freeze to death if you cannot pass. So, once again I ask you, young Solo. Do you desire death?"

Anakin shivered violently, his numb fingers were already turning blue at the tips, as were his bare toes. Many of his open wounds on his arms and legs had stopped bleeding, not because they were healing, but because the blood was freezing as it left his body. Anakin hugged himself to keep warm, all the while trying to keep the voice's words in mind. Despite everything, there was one thing he knew for sure. He was not ready to die yet.

The world was still spinning before him, even with his eyes closed. Yet, with his eyes closed, he could also see something else. What looked like many faces, bodies, all made out of Force energy, flailing helplessly from the wall. It was like the sphere he and Tahiri had found on Yavin IV, where a Sith Lord had imprisoned the souls of so many. Only this time, instead of the innocence projected the souls of the children, Anakin could only find madness and despair.

Souls, drawn in and lost to insanity, doomed to perpetuate the darkness that had taken them in the first place.

As he watched, these bodies crawled over each other, one after another. Once enough of these trapped souls made it to one side, the asteroid shifted, as if the combined weight of their despair and anger had moved it. The beast like-creatures on the opposite side seemed unaffected by the changes in gravity, holding their poses whether they were on the ceiling or wall. When one of the crawling souls reached the foot of a creature, the creature bent down and appeared to devour it

whole. The creature howled once more, but made no effort to leave its position.
Swallowing, Anakin closed his eyes, trying to remember what it was like to sense the thoughts of another. The freezing temperature helped slow his heart rate as he concentrated. He ignored his own self, focusing instead on the smoky, dark souls that lined the tunnel-like chasm walls. Whispers began to fill his mind, even as frost gathered on his face. Anakin focused harder, his forehead scrunched in concentration. White hot pain filled his mind. Then a deep, deep depression set in. Gasping, Anakin's eyes snapped open, the cold air burning his eyes and lungs. Anakin squeezed his eyes shut reflexively, but the pain of all the trapped souls was too much for him to bear. Pleas for release. A request to end their suffering. They wanted it all to stop. Countless centuries of knowing nothing but agony had reduced others to jabbering wrecks. Some latched onto Anakin presence, recognizing it as the only place that didn't cause pain.
Anakin was drowning in their emotions. Faces. A little girl. The daughter of one of the miners. Trapped in an endless nightmare. A family. Minds shredded. Others reduced to barely sentient creatures. Heart thudding loudly in his chest. Anakin shaking his head as more pain than he thought possible cycled through his body. He could feel himself being devoured, being suffocated in the vacuum of space. Being burned to death. Shredded by faulty machinery. Falling. Bones crushing.
Anakin tried to tear himself away. When he couldn't, panic set in. With a yell, Anakin's eyes flew open once more. This time, he used the pain and terror he was feeling out of pure instinct. Wanting nothing more than to live, purple lightning flew out from his fingertips and streaked across the surfaces of the wall.
Audible wails filled the air. The specter of the little girl shuddered, then let out a keening cry before disintegrating under the onslaught.
Wild-eyed. Anakin didn't stop until every whisper in his mind had quieted. Until the walls of the tunnel were charred black from the destructive force he had unleashed. Even the beasts waiting for him on the other side were gone, nothing left but floating wisps of smoke. The asteroid appeared to have stopped rotating and all was still.
"*What did you hear?"*
"Pleas," Anakin said, breaths coming out in ragged pants as he stared at his hands in shock. "They wanted me to help them. But there were too many. I would have died if I tried to help them all."
"*Why did you not help the ones you could?"*

"I didn't know how," Anakin said miserably. "If I knew…but then, I didn't have the time either. I couldn't save any of them."
"*That is not something new to you, Anakin Solo. You have failed to save many before. What makes this time different?"*
Anakin closed his eyes as his tears crystalized. "I was scared. I wanted to help them. But I didn't have the time, I didn't know how. Instead of doing something I…I panicked. I killed them all."
"*They were just ghosts of the past. Already dead. From their whispers, did you learn anything?"*
"I did."
"*And what did you learn?"*
Anakin swallowed painfully. "There is a reason why they existed for so long. Why there is no Jedi equivalent to this or the orb on Yavin IV. Things at peace, content with their lot in life, disappear. But the stronger emotions will remain."
"*And your emotions? If you should do this again?"*
Anakin was now absently walking across the bridge. The skin on his feet was tearing because of how cold the metal panels were, but he did not feel it. His eyes were practically frozen shut, but the Force let him see. His suffering let him know that he was still alive. That he could still accomplish what he desired. "I would do the same. I had no other choice. If I did not do what I did, they would have overwhelmed me, and I would have died."
"Do you fear death? It is only a return to the Force. A rejoining of a fragment with the whole."
"If I am dead, those who rely on me will suffer as well. It does not matter if Jaina, Jacen, and Tahiri no longer care. *I* still care. My death will prevent me from protecting them."
"Once you are one with the Force, you could do so much more than your body will allow."
Anakin forced himself to trudge on, fatigue touching the very core of his being. He was so cold now he no longer felt the rest of his body. He reached the other side of the bridge and stumbled through an airlock. It was only marginally warmer on the other side, with artificial gravity keeping him just tied down to the floor. The first thing he noticed was that the room was completely round and made of metal. It almost looked like a dueling ring. The next thing he noticed was his lightsaber. It was suspended by some sort of field directly to his side. Discarding the vibroblade, with a frost-bitten hand, Anakin removed the lightsaber. Its warm weight familiar in his otherwise numb hands. He was still viewing the world through his Force-sight and when his

fingers wrapped around the hilt of the saber, the lambent crystal pulsated.
At once, everything went dark.
Anakin was aware of the world around him, but now, he realized, he was seeing it through the senses of the lambent. There was nothing Yuuzhan Vong in the room, so it was as blind as he had once been. He disconnected himself from the crystal, and when he did, his normal Force-sight returned.
Three figures waited for him.
His sluggish mind tried to make sense of what he was seeing, but he was too exhausted, in too much pain to give it much thought. He couldn't comprehend how they were in the room with him.
"Jaina? Jacen? Tahiri?" Anakin croaked. It was them, but they looked older. Much older. How long had he been on the asteroid? His brother and sister were in standard Jedi robes, and Tahiri was decked out in Yuuzhan Vong armor.
"You're pathetic, Anakin," Tahiri spat at him, her lightsaber humming to life. "Look at you!"
"Like death warmed over," Jaina agreed, her purple blade similarly igniting.
"We told you to give up, Anakin. But apparently you still haven't learned anything." Jacen's voice was just as condescending as ever.
After everything that he had just went through, Anakin felt a rare spike of anger towards his brother. "Eat bantha podoo, Jacen. You're such a self-righteous hypocrite when it comes to the Force. Sure, I caused some deaths, but you caused many more because you were afraid to act!"
"You have to think before you act, Anakin. Not rush off with only a half-assed plan and a lightsaber," Jaina said in defense of her twin. "Stopping you now will prevent you from needlessly sacrificing the lives of other innocents in the future."
"What?" Anakin rasped in disbelief. "You can't be…"
Jaina came at him first, her blade slashing at him without warning. Anakin twisted to the side, frantically raising his blade to block her follow-up attacks. "Jaina! Wait!"
"Time for talk is over, Little Brother," Jaina said. "Let me tell you that I hate you for making me do this, but it's the only way!"
Anakin dodged another attack, back-pedaling rapidly. He glanced back at his sister and could see wisps of dark-side energy flowing from her. Her hate pierced him as effectively as any lightsaber could. Just as Anakin was about to surrender to his sister, another lightsaber blade

nearly decapitated him. Instead, it created a burn across his back, cutting away the last of his shirt.
Anakin weakly flailed at his new attacker, realizing that Jacen had joined in the fight. "Wait! Please!"
"No more waiting." Jacen said calmly, driving an elbow into Anakin's stomach.
Anakin collapsed to the ground, in too much pain to fight back. He expected the killing blow to come at any moment, and wasn't disappointed when someone grabbed his hair and jerk his head back. What did surprise him, however, was who was standing over him.
It was Tahiri. As shock registered across his face, Tahiri let out a mocking laughter. "Why so surprised, Solo? After all these years, did you think I would take your little running away act any better than last time?"
"That's not why I'm surprised," Anakin managed through chapped lips. The Tahiri holding his head back was literally seeped in the dark side, flickering back and forth between the Force and the edge of his Vong-sense.
"You're the last, Anakin," Tahiri said tilting her chin back. "The last person I will ever allow to break my heart. The *only* person who will break my heart. You've taught me what betrayal feels like. What it feels like to have your feelings spat on and thrown back in your face. And now, you die."
Seeing her blade close in, something within Anakin snapped. Anger. Despair. The feelings he had absorbed in the previous chamber crashing down on him. He channeled those feelings into his muscles, wanting more than anything to live.
Running on pure, animalistic instinct, Anakin summoned his lightsaber back into his hand. Just before Tahiri's saber connected with his head, his own blade lanced out and burned right through her throat. With a wordless gasp, Tahiri fell to the ground, dead.
Jaina and Jacen, who had been standing off to the side to watch, quickly re-engaged their younger brother. Anakin whirled around, summoning Tahiri's lightsaber into the hand of his broken arm. He knocked aside Jaina's blade with his good hand, and then decapitated his sister almost automatically with the other.
Jacen leaped backwards and summoned Jaina's blade into his free hand. "I always knew that I would have to be the one to stop you. Look what you did, Anakin. Your own sister. Tahiri. Is there no length your ego won't take you?"
Anakin stared, horror struck at the corpses of two of the most important women in his life. "Why…why are you attacking me!"

"To prevent you from ruining this galaxy," Jacen said, anger reflecting in every syllable. "Master Skywalker knew that you would become a threat. The three of us, as one final favor to you, decided to see if you were worth redeeming." Jacen motioned to the bodies. "Apparently you aren't."
"This is your doing, isn't it, Jacen," Anakin said tiredly. "You even told me yourself that you were jealous of me. I can't believe you would go this far."
"Don't turn it around on me, Little Brother. You're the one with the hero-complex. You just weren't ever the hero you thought you were." Jacen lunged at Anakin in a corkscrew maneuver, purple and green blades scything through the air.
Anakin, with the one-armed handicap despite having two sabers, did his best to keep himself from engaging his brother. Yet, Jacen was relentless. Twin blades flashed again and again. Anakin's good arm was burned. His side branded. His own feeble attacks brushed aside or seemingly ineffective against his old brother. Another strike of Jacen's saber, and the last of Anakin's clothing flared to incandescence.
Anakin collapsed to his knees, desperately trying to fight Jacen off. It had to all be a nightmare. It couldn't be happening. One blow sent Tahiri's lightsaber flying out of his hand. A kick caused his own to clatter away.
Jacen placed a lightsaber on either side of Anakin's neck. Anakin's flesh hissed as the energy from the blades got close, the buzz loud in his ears. "Good bye, Anakin. As you can see, the galaxy has gotten along just fine without you."
Anakin used the last of his concentration to remotely control one of his lost lightsabers. It speared through Jacen's chest with the speed of a repeater bolt, dropping the older Solo instantly. Anakin pulled out of his Force-sight as he heard his older brother's body thud lifelessly to the ground.
His own strength spent, naked and bloodied, Anakin sagged to the ground. He lay between the bodies of the three people he had cared about the most, reaching out to hold the hands of the two nearest him. He couldn't believe what had just occurred. What he had just done. Agony swelled in his chest, and Anakin let out a whimpering sob.
"*Now, Anakin Solo. Do you wish to die?"*
Anakin nodded once, his consciousness leaving him as he surrendered to the bliss a deep sleep would bring him.
Though Anakin was not aware of it, a cloaked figure stepped into the chamber and knelt by him, placing a pale, bony hand across his forehead. "Then die you shall, young hero. From this moment forward,

Anakin Solo shall cease to exist as a Jedi. That Anakin died the moment you struck down your brother. When you awaken, you will be reborn. From the Jedi, you have learned pleasure, peace, and prosperity. Here, you shall learn emptiness, desperation, despair, and hate. And in the future, young Solo, from the Sith you will learn what it means to have the power to accomplish anything and everything you desire. But now is not the time. Now, you shall rest. For there are great things in store for you, and I, Lumiya, Dark Lady of the Sith, cannot wait to see them unfold."

[X] [X]

When Anakin next awoke, he realized his head was resting in someone's lap and that they were resting a hand on his forehead.

"Good nap?" The voice of Alema Rar, unusually soft and gentle, asked.

"Alema?"

"Yeah."

"Where…where are we?"

"On an asteroid with one heck of a teacher."

"Oh." Anakin paused as a cascade of emotion rushed through him. "So it wasn't a dream."

"I wish it was," Alema's voice was hoarse.

Anakin finally opened his eyes and saw the Twi'lek staring down at him. Her face was gaunt and haunted, her green eyes tinged with flecks of yellow.

"I really wish it was," Alema repeated, pained.

They were alone in the darkened room, illuminated by a single, blue, glow-pannel, with memories both would rather forget. Memories that caused an empty, hollow feeling in Anakin's chest. Yet, after the initial surge of emotion, he found that what he had just experienced didn't really hurt him. It was like being stabbed in the same place over and over again. Eventually the knife ran out of material to cut, or the nerves in the area became completely deadened. There was nothing else left for Anakin to feel hurt over. There was just a gnawing absence where his heart had once been.

Slowly, he shifted until he was seated next to Alema. Her hand quickly found his again and squeezed hard, as if she was trying to assure herself that he was really there. It was the first time Anakin had ever seen Alema look so vulnerable, so scared, so in pain that she wasn't even bothering to hide it. Though both he and Alema could still feel the Force, they had cut themselves off from the rest of the galaxy, from any other potential source of hurt. It was a self-preservation instinct that neither were keen to reverse anytime soon.

Anakin returned her gesture, suddenly finding himself with a similar need for the warmth and comfort of the touch of another. For something other than the painful cold he had felt. Their feelings of loss and loneliness lessened by the presence of the other.
They were in a room with two bunks, a fresher, and not much else. They weren't wearing much else either. They were wrapped in bacta patches, with only a single strip of cloth to preserve their modesty. It was still bitterly cold in the room, but livable enough after everything they had experienced.
"Fine place I picked to visit, huh," Anakin managed faintly.
"Heck, this is nothing," Alema tried to smile gamely, but failed and bowed her head. "And I thought my head couldn't get any more screwed up than it already was."
"Hey, we're all breakable sometimes," Anakin said softly, feeling her lean against his shoulder. His words echoing in his mind as he reflected on his own traumatic experiences. "What matters is how we put ourselves back together."
Alema turned her head up to look at him. Green eyes, so different than the ones he was used to seeing, reflecting pain and madness. "And if you become so broken, you can't find the right pieces? If you keep on breaking, and breaking until there's nothing left?"
Anakin leaned down, resting his forehead on her warmer-than-human skin. It occurred to him in some part of his mind that this was the closest he had ever been with the Twi'lek Jedi. And yet, he found that he didn't care. That her companionship and wellbeing was suddenly worth more to him than all the credits in the galaxy. "Then you let another in. Someone you trust. To help you. It's what friends are…"
Alema reached up and pulled Anakin's head down so that their lips met. Their lips touched, and the horror and pain they experienced echoed through the faint Force bond they had. The two slowly lowered themselves onto the bunk they were sitting on, still embracing. Eyes closed.
The kiss grew heated as Anakin's own experiences reverberated and harmonized with Alema's. Fearing death. Wanting to live. To feel something other than pain. Than terror. Having your worst fears assuaged by the one person they knew wouldn't hurt them. The one person who was suffering just like they were. Anything to fill in the emptiness their experiences had created.
The sensations seemed all the more intense, like every fiber of their being had developed a heightened sense of awareness.
The slight spiciness of alien lips.

The protected, safe feeling of being wrapped in his powerful Force presence, in his strong arms.
Small hands running up and down his back, the warm weight of her lekku twitching under his hands.
Skin on skin.
Hearts beating.
The pain and terror dissolving.
For a moment, nothing else existed but the other.
Seconds ticked by before their lips eventually parted. Their breath came out in small puffs of vapor in the cold room as they kept their arms in a loose grip around the other.
"Wow," Alema whispered softly, a hand gently reaching up to caress his cheek.
"Alema," Anakin swallowed, feeling a pang of guilt. "I'm…"
"Shhhh…."Alema pressed a finger to his lips, green eyes glittering softly. "I know, but please don't say it. Can't we just pretend for a little bit? Pretend that we could be something more? That I could ever mean more to you than just a friend?"
"Alema," Anakin murmured, his eyes softening at the pain he felt flowing out from her. This close to her, he could sense her unshielded thoughts. She missed her sister, wanted something, anything to stop the pain. Whatever had happened to her had first built up her anger towards the Yuuzhan Vong, and then stripped it away so that all Alema was left with was an aching feeling of loss. Of need.
"Okay…okay."
He lowered his head and they kissed again. After everything they had gone through, every waking moment of terror and agony, it was just the two of them.
Two frightened teenagers in a darkened room with only each other for comfort.
[X] [X]
Anakin and Alema wore the black robes that had been provided for them and ventured outside of the room. They had eaten the few bites of food provided and could feel someone in the Force summoning them. They followed their instincts until they found themselves in another common room of sorts, filled with only three chairs in the middle. One of the chairs was already occupied.
"Brisha Syo," Alema recognized the woman instantly, but also realized that she could not only feel her in the Force, but that the woman was Force-sensitive as well.
"Jedi Rar, Solo," the woman in the dark life-preserving suit greeted. "How do you feel?"

"How do I feel?" Alema yelled, she thrust out her hand and Brisha was lifted into the air by her throat. "How do you think I feel you kriffing schutta! You used my master against me! My sister against me! You made me want to die! You made me beg for death! Again and again, but you still weren't pleased! In many ways, I did die! You *dare* asked me how I feel!"
Despite Alema's outburst, Anakin did nothing to intervene. He too felt anger towards the woman for manipulating him, for using his own feelings, doubts, and fears against him.
Alema made a gesture, and Brisha was hurled across the room. The other woman, however, landed gracefully on her feet. "Are you finished?"
"You! You want to know how we feel? Then…"
"You both feel empty. Alone and frightened. But also strong, yes?" Brisha cut Alema off. "You have the Force, yet you keep yourself isolated from the rest of the galaxy for fear of pain. You have each other, yet are content with the lie you have created. Anything to stave off the loneliness, to minimize the pain that comes with a relationship of any sorts."
Both teens stared at Brisha. "How?..."
"The name for what you are feeling is *freedom*," Brisha said, smiling behind her mask. "Free to do as you desire. To make your own choices without the expectations of the rest of the galaxy."
"Some freedom," Anakin snorted. "You torture us, have us play your sick games. Take away our Force powers and force us to earn it back. Isolate us here on this asteroid."
"Released you from the burdens you carried. From an antiquated view of the Force which was only contributing to your unhappiness," Brisha said calmly. "I opened your eyes to the truth about yourselves. Showed you the abyss that lies within you, the one you feared to stare into yourselves. You survived, this dangerous and deadly place while completely powerless, drowning in your own rage and doubts. I have taken you past your limits, and are the two of you not stronger for it? Tell me, after everything you just experienced, will anyone or thing truly be able to hurt you as I have?"
"You say that like pain is a good thing. You sound like a Vong." Alema scoffed. "And what's so dangerous about this place? It's an abandoned asteroid."
"An asteroid filled with what you would call the dark side." Brisha resumed her seat and motioned for the two to fill the other chairs. Anakin took a seat, but Alema remained standing behind him. "Is what you have seen and experienced not an exemplar of the dark side? Is

this not what you have been taught to fear so much: aggression, violence, hate, passion? You have been taught that the dark side is more natural, easier than the light. But now that you have plunged into the deepest of depths, were you weakened or strengthened by your experience?"
"We were made stronger," Anakin admitted.
"And what of this 'dark side'?" Brisha pressed. "Was it everything you thought it was? Was it worth hobbling yourselves, ignoring a part of who you are, all this time?"
"I understand the Force much better now," Anakin said, his blue eyes sharply analyzing the Force sensitive woman in front of him. He wasn't naïve enough to believe that she had done everything for his and Alema's benefit. At the same time though, she obviously knew things that most Jedi didn't. This was a chance to learn more about the Force through someone who had grown up outside of the Jedi Order. Someone who wasn't scared of, what many might consider, the darker aspects of the Force. "I'm also more convinced than ever that there is no dark or light side of the Force. Was what you did to us dark? No. Despite the pain and suffering, you wanted us to learn about feelings Jedi are taught to suppress, to fear. Is this asteroid filled with the dark side? The darker emotions of people once living, maybe. And when those emotions combined with the Force, it left a physical impression. A true Jedi has to know more than what they call the light side, don't they? They have to at least understand and accept their darker emotions. Otherwise those emotions will control and overwhelm them."
"Very good," Brisha inclined her head. "And have you accepted your 'darker' emotions?"
Anakin regarded Brisha neutrally. "I'm sure you'll be more than willing to help me in that regard."
Brisha smiled mysteriously and tilted her head forward slightly. Her eyes then darted to Alema. "And you, Jedi Rar?"
Alema glanced to Anakin. "If he's in, I'm in."
"It will be painful. As my master has taught me, no lesson is truly learned until it has been purchased with pain."
"Then we've already made our down payment, haven't we?" Alema's eyes glittered with excitement as she took a seat in the unoccupied chair.
"You have indeed," Brisha said. "Then I welcome the two of you as your teacher and your student."
Anakin inclined his head. "We are honored, Master."
[X] Chapter End [X]
A\N: And we enter a brief hiatus on that note…

This *is* an A/T story, so don't worry, Anakin and Tahiri get back together for good... eventually. Anakin and Alema still have one more chapter together in the intermission after Rebel Stand, before they rejoin the rest of the cast in Destiny's Way.

I'd definitely appreciate any reviews during the break. Let me know what you think of the story so far, your favorite parts, NJO characters you want to see more of, constructive criticism is fine too. Another big thanks to all who continue to review.

I'm currently starting chapter 35 of the story, the penultimate chapter of a very AU Book One of the Force Heretic Trilogy. I pretty much dropped Book One's entire storyline and replaced it with my own and a heavily modified version of Book Two's storyline. My version of the Trilogy is coming out to be slightly longer than I expected, so it will probably take this story to somewhere between chapter 45 and 50. Which means the final chapter count of the story will definitely be closer to 60. Hence my request for reviews during the small break...I could definitely use the motivation.

Until next time, this is Origami Fish signing off.